



WILLIAM W.
JOHNSTONE

THE
DEVIL'S
TOUCH

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SATAN'S WARRIORS

Judith Mayberry opened her mouth to scream when a paw-like hand clamped around her ankle and another covered her mouth. She was dragged to a thicket and pulled down into the earth through a hole she never knew existed. When Judith came to her senses she was naked and cold.

She had never seen such horrible-looking monsters in all her life. Not even in the movies!

Suddenly two young Beasts seized Judith and forced her to a hands and knees position. Then the old Beast bit her on the neck several times as he mated with her. After a short time she started getting warmer. She looked at the back of her hands. Thick coarse hair was sprouting, not just on the back of her hands, but all over her body.

Her face, especially her jaw, was beginning to ache. Her teeth felt odd. She ran her tongue over them and found they were fanged. Several of the Beasts were talking and Judith found she could understand them. She crawled over and they welcomed her.

She was one of them.

She tossed her head, glad of her new strength and body. One earring gleamed dully in the gloom of the cave, as it remained pierced in place. That was all that was left of the woman once known as Judith Mayberry.

The Devil's work had begun...

THE DEVIL'S TOUCH

BY WILLIAM W. JOHNSTONE



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To Charles and Bobbi

The prayer for exorcism and the ritual was taken, in part, from Montague Summer's *History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul LTD, London.

Every sound shall end in silence, but the silence never dies.

-Samuel Miller Hageman

But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail.

-William Shakespeare

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Epilogue

ON THE ORDERS OF THE DARK ONE

She knelt in the center of the circle drawn on the floor. The circle was drawn with yellow chalk. She was careful that one bare knee was placed on the symbol denoting La Maison De Dieu, the past, and her other bare knee on the symbol denoting La Lune, the future. The symbols were widely separated and she was forced to spread her thighs far apart. She was naked.

The candles in the huge room flickered, casting long yellow shadows around the room, darkly illuminating the circle of men and women surrounding the girl in the yellow circle. A lone flute, played by a young man wearing a black hooded robe cast its lonely sounds, the notes fluttering almost passively through the room.

The scene was soon to become anything but passive.

Kitty Carrier kept her eyes downcast as she had been instructed by the Coven leader. She knew what was next in store for her. Sweat beaded her face and began trickling down between her breasts at the thought.

"Renaissance," a man spoke from the darkness outside the circle.

It was time for Kitty's rebirth.

A rubber penis was placed in the circle, the lifelike dildo covered with drawings of many colors. Just under the flared head was a drawing depicting the fifteenth card of the major arcana of the tarot: *Le Diable*. The Devil faced upward, just under the flared head of the rubber penis. When the Devil is positioned thusly, the picture denotes bondage; subordination; suffering; shock; ravage; violence; self-punishment.

Renaissance. Rebirth. A time for renouncing one God and choosing another. When the picture of the Devil is placed upside down, only then can a person be freed. But if marriage has already occurred, no divorce is possible. For when one marries Satan, the contract is final.

"Let it commence," the man again spoke from the darkness. "She is ready."

The young woman's fingers found the rubber of the garishly painted penis. She lifted it. Her hand trembled at its weight and bulk.

Kitty was sixteen.

She was a virgin.

The music from the flute stopped in mid-note.

Outside the drape-darkened windows of the huge house, black clouds rolled overhead, obscuring any light from God's moon. The misshapen forms of nonhuman things began to emerge from the

ground, to dance obscenely under the whispering winds and the dark clouds. The grotesque creatures were known as Beasts—the Devil's spawn. They were as old as evil and older than man is known today. The Beasts were mistakes in the scheme of living things. Failures that Satan chose for his own. They are found all over the world; wherever there is a coven that worships the Prince of Darkness, the Lord of Flies or the King of Filth.

Satan.

The Beasts began growling with pleasure as the screams of the young woman penetrated the wood and glass and cloth and stone of the mansion as the rubber penis denoting the Dark One's organ penetrated her.

Blood began streaking her thighs, and her screams became shrieks of agony as the penis tore its way into her.

Kitty hunched on the floor and wailed. "It's cold! It's cold!"

Within her wet warmth, the penis came alive as the men and women of the coven chanted to the Prince of Darkness.

The Beasts, now freed after a two year sleep under the blanket of earth, danced and growled and snapped their fanged animal jaws, flinging their hairy arms and prancing about on bent legs and cloven-hooved feet. Slobber drooled and dripped from the jaws in stinking ropes.

"Take this girl!" the coven leader shouted, his voice rising over the chantings of the worshippers of the black marriage. "She longs to be free from the chains of the Christian God and to drink the wine of the Prince of Darkness."

The coven members began stamping their bare feet on the floor. The room began to stink of sulphur.

Kitty pushed the devil's organ deeper; steam rose from between her legs as heat met cold. Sweat bathed her and her hair became damp and limp. Her eyes were glazed from pain and the extreme changes in body temperature. She groaned and then screamed out.

The black candles dripped hot wax as Kitty pushed the cold organ to its full length. She collapsed on her bare back, her legs spread obscenely wide, her knees bent, her feet flat on the floor. The wide base of the cold rubber covered her pubic area.

It was time for the marriage. An unholy uniting. A mating and marriage between Kitty and the Devil. A dirty covering of tattered lace was spread over Kitty, covering all but her face. The coven leader knelt down, holding a dirty goblet to the girl's lips. He ordered her to drink. The goblet was emptied of its content: semen collected from the coven hierarchy. Working his hand under the filthy, ragged lace covering, the leader worked the organ in and out, bringing grunts of pain from the girl. He removed the Devil's organ and laid it aside.

Kitty moaned as the pain left her.

"Do you renounce your parents, all blood relations, all friends not of this unholy coven, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, the Saints, and the Holy Cross?" he asked the young girl.

"Yes," she gasped.

"You are firm in your conviction that God no longer lives within you and from this moment on He never shall?"

"Yes."

"You will serve me as you will serve the Prince, recognizing that I act in his place within this body of men and women known forever more as the coven?" She nodded her head.

He removed the tattered lace, spread the girl's legs, and mounted her, thrusting into her brutally. She cried out, not in pain, but crying out her love for Satan.

After the leader had finished with her, Kitty was then taken by all the males present.

The leader then squatted down and Kitty pressed her lips to his ass. The marriage was sealed.

"You are now one of us and one with us," Kitty was told. "And thus it will always be." He turned to a group of black-robed women. "Clean her and bath her in sweet oils. Prepare her for the meeting with the daughter of the Devil."

Kitty was pulled to her feet. Blood and semen stained her inner thighs. She was taken from the room. She was so sore she could hardly walk.

A man padded to the leader's side. "The Princess is here."

Frank Gilbert, leader of the Logandale, New York coven, and professor of history at Nelson College smiled. "Prepare the coven to meet our Princess, daughter of our Master."

"At once."

The Beasts had ceased their prancing and dancing and howling. They turned their hideous faces to the sky. The sky grew darker. The winds picked up, bringing with them a foulness, as if the wind had snaked its way out of the burning bowels of Hell.

It had.

BOOK ONE

ONE

Every male head in the classroom turned at the young lady's entrance. And every male present had but one thought: what they would give to spread the legs of the girl and gently take her. Every male in the room would give almost anything for the opportunity to spend just one night with her.

Every male but one: Sam Balon.

Sam had dropped the name of his adopted father, King, choosing to take his real father's name, Balon. Sam Balon, Sr. had been a minister, pastor of a church in Whitfield, Nebraska back in the late fifties. Young Sam had learned the story—the true story of what had happened in Whitfield—when he had been forced to face the Devil in actual combat. It was there he had met Nydia, and married her, performing the ceremony himself, just as his father had done with Jane Ann, and a son had been created. And just like the father, the son had been forced into combat with Satan, ultimately destroying a coven at Falcon House, in the wilds of Canada. (The Devil's Heart)

And Sam was truly in love with his wife, Nydia, and loved his young son, Sam, Jr., now approaching his third year. The child appeared normal in all respects . . . but both mother and father still harbored lingering doubts about the child.

For it was more than conceivable the child was a spawn of the Devil.

But so far, so good.

Both Nydia and Sam now felt the Devil had ceased in his pursuit of them. Perhaps the Dark One had found more easily attainable prey. They hoped so.

Sam looked at the beautiful young woman who had just entered the classroom of Professor Gilbert. She was accompanied by Professor Edie Cash. Obviously, the young woman was of some special importance to be treated in such a manner. No doubt about it, Sam thought, she is a very lovely woman.

Sam caught the eyes of Xaviere Flaubert, a lovely young lady from Montreal. She smiled at him and rolled her eyes, pointing at the young men all fascinated by the newcomer. Sam grinned at her and winked. They were good friends, Sam, Nydia, and Xaviere, socializing often. Sam looked back at the newcomer.

The young woman wore her hair long, a dark, rich brown that

tumbled down to the center of her back. She was tall, with a magnificent figure. Her complexion was flawless. Full lips and very pale gray eyes. Sam thought she and Xaviere looked a lot alike. The pale eyes shifted, and for a moment, lingered on Sam. The young woman smiled at him, and Sam returned the smile. He looked around at Xaviere. The two young women did resemble each other. Same pale eyes, brown hair, tall, and both had great figures.

Professor Cash left the room and Professor Gilbert tapped a pencil on his desk. "Class, I would like to introduce our new arrival. This is Miss Desiree Lemieux. She has just transferred in from Paris. Her parents have purchased Fox Estate and she has come Sam thought Professor Gilbert was going to fall all over himself. That he was quite taken with the young woman was obvious.

"Oh. my," Gilbert said. "We're all going to have to brush up on our French, I see."

The young men in the room all shared the same thought: They would like to brush up against Desiree.

"My English is quite good, Professor," she replied, in a voice that touched the groin of every male.

Again, those pale eyes touched Sam, then quickly dropped away.

"Yes, you certainly do, Desiree," the professor agreed. "Well, why don't you sit—umm—right over there, next to Mr. Balon, and we'll open class."

"Is she as beautiful as everyone says she is?" Nydia asked him.

Sam, Nydia, and Little Sam lived several miles outside of Logandale, about five miles from the center of Nelson campus. Nelson, one of the most expensive private colleges in North America, would have been financially unattainable for Sam had not his father set aside insurance money for his—at that time unborn—offspring. Nydia, who had been attending Carrington College before she met Sam, had transferred to Nelson after their marriage. For Nydia, money was no obstacle, for she was an extremely wealthy young woman, having inherited all of Roma and Falcon's holdings, worldwide, at their death. At the hands of Sam.

Nydia's mother and stepfather had been witch and warlock. Her true father was Sam Balon. Sam and Nydia were half brother and half sister. But they had been forgiven for that and allowed to live as man and wife. Forgiven by the One who has the power to forgive any sin.

"Yes, she is," Sam replied.

"Oh?" Nydia turned dark blue eyes to her husband. "Better looking than someone I might name?" she teased him.

"Well, now." Sam looked up from the research he was doing on ancient civilizations. His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Let me think. Umm? Desiree is—"

"Oh?" Nydia interrupted. "My. With a name like that, she would have to be lovely."

"Oh, she is! 'Bout this tall." He held up a hand. Then, using both hands, formed an hourglass shape.

"Really?" Nydia stepped closer to her husband. "How interesting."

"Perfection," Sam said, not realizing he was about to take the game past the foul line. He opened his hands and made a squeezing gesture. "'Bout like that, I'd say."

"Big boobs, huh?" There was a flatness to her tone that Sam failed to catch.

Sam rolled his eyes.

Nydia took his hands in hers and pressed them to her own breasts. "About that size, Sam?"

The dim light of realization clicked on in Sam's brain. Struggling mentally to get his foot out of his mouth, Sam said, "I would say there is only one person I've seen that is more beautiful than Desiree."

Warning signals flashed dangerously hot in Nydia's eyes. "Oh? And who might that be—*dear*?"

Sam looked up into her eyes and grinned. "Why— you, Nydia."

The warning lights dimmed, then cut off. "Almost swallowed both feet, didn't you, darling?" she said with a smile.

He closed his textbook and pulled her onto his lap. "I did come close." He kissed her. "But I'm only a man, remember?"

"I'll keep that in mind. What did Xaviere have to say about the new girl in class?"

"She thought the boys' behavior very funny."

Nydia unbuttoned his shirt and tugged at the hair on his chest. "Since Little Sam is with Janet, at her house ... why don't we mess around some?"

"Got anything special in mind?"

She whispered in his ear.

"My pleasure," Sam said.

"Is the child one of ours?" Professor Gilbert asked, looking at Little Sam but speaking to the group of men and women gathered at the Sakall home.

"I cannot tell," the daughter of Satan said, straightening up after her examination of the child. She brushed back her long brown hair. "There appear to be no birthmarks denoting which side of the lineage takes precedent."

Janet Sakall sat in a chair, a pout on her pretty face. She was rapidly blooming into full womanhood. Now in her fifteenth year, the young witch looked older than her years. She was quite pretty, with auburn hair, a shapely body, and fully developed breasts. Her eyes

were pure evil. She licked her full lips, her tongue flicking over teeth that could become fanged at the blink of an eyelid.

Janet met the stare of the daughter of Satan without flinching. "Why are we waiting?" she asked. "We could take them any time."

"The impetuosity of youth," the Princess said with a smile.

"I'm older than you," Janet reminded the young woman.

"In the way humans measure time, yes," the Princess acknowledged. "But in my veins race a thousand years of service to our Prince."

"You must not question the Princess," Bert Sakall admonished his daughter.

The Princess held up one hand, the fingers long and delicate, shaped like a pianist's fingers. "She has the right, servant. She performed well at Falcon House." Her pale gray eyes touched the eyes of Janet. "You have the complete trust of Sam and Nydia?"

"Totally, Princess."

"I see." The Princess smiled. "You have a plan, I am sure."

"I want Sam Balon," the young girl said simply.

The Princess laughed, exposing perfectly shaped teeth. "You are worse than my mother." She shrugged. "Or so I have been informed about her. My earth father is a handsome man, no doubt about that. But tell me, do you keep your brains between your legs?"

"Of course not. But I have been chaste now for more than two years, at my Master's orders. I may be only a girl, but I have a woman's needs. Think about it, Princess. What man, young or old, does not desire a young girl? Young girls are the image of innocence, their flesh not yet tainted by the lusts of full womanhood." She laughed. "Or so men think. Should I succeed, Sam Balon would be guilt-ridden, and easy to control."

The Princess of Darkness nodded her head and smiled her approval. "Continue," she urged.

"And there is Jon Le Moyne for Nydia," Janet said. "Divide and conquer."

Janet's mother stirred at the mention of Jon Le Moyne. Sylvia Sakall, a woman in her late thirties, and like her husband, a devout follower of the Prince of Darkness, had dreams of the young man named Jon. She had heard of him, as had most women in the small community of Logandale. But the story went that the young high school boy was to follow in the footsteps of his uncle, Father Daniel Le Moyne. But the Dark One was soon to change all that, so the coven had been told. A female had been chosen for the young virgin boy with, so the rumors went, an instrument of love that would be the envy of male porn stars.

The Princess picked up on the thoughts from Janet's mother. "You are not to interfere, servant," she told the woman. "The Master has

plans for young Le Moyne. Do you understand all that?"

Sylvia Sakall bowed her head. "I understand, Princess."

"Yes," the Princess said. "That would be a coup. Nydia and Jon Le Moyne. Yes. And that might be the way to eliminate the priest, as well. And Sam, if you should succeed, would be so guilt-ridden, he could be controlled. Very well, I shall take it up with the Master. Your plan has merit, Janet. Carry it through if the opportunity presents itself, but do not endanger yourself or the coven or me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Princess."

The lights in the room flickered, faded into darkness, and when they popped back on, the young woman was gone.

* * *

"Please forgive me," the young man prayed in the darkness of his bedroom. "But I am human, with human needs and wants. I try, Lord, I really do. But it's so difficult."

Jon Le Moyne struggled to fight back the erotic images playing sexual scenes in his young fertile mind. His thoughts, as always, were about the dark-haired wife of Sam Balon, Nydia. His mind replayed the scenes, each time adding new twists and turns ... and positions.

Jon's hand crept over his belly and gripped his growing heavy erection. He struggled to keep from masturbating. He tried prayer. It didn't work. It was as if his prayers were going unheard. He did not understand what was happening to him; why was this happening? Up until only a few months ago, his thoughts had been almost pure in content.

It was then Jon began experiencing dreams of a highly erotic nature. Then the high school junior had seen the woman in his dreams, and she had haunted his thoughts ever since. It was, Jon thought, almost as if he were possessed.

He gripped his erection harder and began stroking himself.

Desiree Lemieux looked out over the dark grounds of Fox Estate. She smiled at some inner thought. Sam Balon entered her mind and she felt the heat build within her virgin body.

She turned at the sound of footsteps. She relaxed. It was only the groundskeeper, Jimmy Perkins.

"Yes, Perkins?"

"Forgive, mistress," the man said, his eyes dull as they swept over the young woman's lushness. "You sent for me?"

"My mother and father would be very disappointed with the condition of these grounds, Perkins. This afternoon I saw a tangle of brush and undergrowth on the east side of the property. Why has that

been permitted to grow?"

Fuck your mother and father, Perkins thought, his dull eyes revealing none of the evil within the man. And fuck the horse they rode in on, too. I know all about your mother and father; know exactly who they are. "It is an unsafe place, mistress. That is the eastern border of the estate. It meets the estate of Mr. Norman Giddon."

"I know all that," Desiree said irritably. "Why should it be unsafe for me?"

"Hollow places in the ground, mistress. With only a thin covering of earth over them. Caves in there that run to the river over there." He pointed with a finger. "It is not safe. That is why the underbrush and thickets are allowed to grow; to discourage intruders."

"All right, Perkins. That will be all."

"Yes, mistress." He shuffled away. He wore an evil smile on his thick wet lips. Mademoiselle Lemieux may be the mistress of Fox Estate, and she might be in favor in the eyes of important people, but Jimmy knew who she was. And he knew she could not really hurt him. He had been around for too long. He had been privy to much information since joining the ranks of the undead more than a quarter of a century back, in Whitfield. He had adored the Devil's agent, Black Wilder, and thought the true Nydia a goddess. This young woman was supposed to be so important in the scheme of things, but she did not impress Jimmy, Not at all.

TWO

Father Daniel Le Moyne stepped from his small living quarters and looked toward the lights of the small college town. The priest had felt an ancient stirring rise from deep within him. He knew what it was. He had experienced it before. And it scared him. He did not know if he could cope with this again. He did not know if he had the strength.

He knew all too well the hand of evil.

He looked at his watch. The LCD flashed eight-ten. He shook his head and walked back toward his quarters. He stopped as the wind whispered around him. The wind rustled the dry leaves on the ground and the starkly naked branches on some of the trees. The wind should have been cool, for this was late October. But the breeze that touched him was hot. And it contained an odor that insulted the priest's nostrils.

Evil, he concluded.

Father Le Moyne shuddered, a cold shaking of both body and spirit.

But not my faith, he thought, and then wondered why he would think that. For nothing had occurred to make him question his faith.

Not lately, the priest amended that thought.

He turned his mind to his nephew, Jon. The boy was battling some inner conflicts, and so far, the priest had not been able to break through to the young man.

Fear touched the priest and he spun around as the sound of heavy, labored breathing reached him. The sound was coming from the side of the church.

The priest walked toward the source of the sound— whatever it, or they, might be. An odor, foul and ugly, reached his nostrils. He wrinkled his nose against the smell.

"Help me," the voice whispered. The words were very slurred. "Help me."

"Who is there?" Father Le Moyne called.

"Help me. For the love of God—help me." Le Moyne could scarcely make out the words. The voice spoke as if it possessed only half a tongue.

The priest walked toward the whispering. His heart was a dull heavy thudding in his chest. And he knew fear. Knew it on a far more intimate basis than ever before. And he could not understand the fear.

The wind picked up, blowing hotly in the priest's face.

The calling, pleading slurred words continued to reach Le Moyne.

Father Le Moyne stepped into the murky shadows.

A bloody hand reached for him as a scream touched his ears.

Chief of Police Monty Draper drove the streets of the small college town. He could not understand the feelings of ... doom, was the word that came to him, that had slipped into his mind just after supper. His face must have registered his thoughts, for his wife had asked him what was wrong.

"Oh, nothing," he lied to her, and that was something he did not like to do. "I just remembered some paperwork I have to do at the station."

"Will you be late?"

"I—I don't know, Viv. Don't wait up for me."

She had smiled at him. "All right, Monty. Just be careful in dealing with the desperadoes."

It was a standing joke between them. Logandale had the lowest crime rate in the entire state. The college was known as a haven for eggheads, not raucous and reveling frat boys. The town itself was just under four thousand population, with a full-time police force of only four men and one woman. The sheriffs department had a substation in Logandale, with one deputy living in town.

Monty had spent ten years on the NYPD, going on disability retirement at the age of thirty-two after taking a shotgun blast in his

legs. He walked with a slight limp that became more pronounced as he grew tired. Unable to put police work out of his mind, and not trained for any other type of work, Monty had answered an ad in a police magazine, driven up to Logandale for an interview, and was hired on the spot. That was three years ago. There had been no major crime in the small town during that time. A few break-ins, some petty theft, a fist fight or two on the weekends. Several domestic situations involving husbands beating the shit out of wives, and one domestic situation of a wife beating the shit out of her husband. No rapes, no armed robberies, no shootings, no knivings, no embezzlements—that came to the attention of the police force—no nothing.

It was boring. But the job paid surprisingly well. But a Boy Scout troop could have handled the job. Up to this point. All that was about to change.

Monty gripped the steering wheel and sighed heavily, trying to shake off the feelings of impending doom. Monty was of average height, average weight, average build; everything about Monty Draper was average, which was the reason he had spent nearly all his time doing undercover and stake-out work for the NYPD. One watch commander had commented that Monty Draper could get lost in a crowd of two.

Logandale, set off the beaten path, with no major highways or interstates running near it, was, putting it simply, a nice place to live. The town was surrounded by dairies, farms, and a sometimes colony of kooky writers and nutsy artists just a few miles out of town. When the colony was in residence—during the summer months—the townspeople viewed them with scarcely concealed amusement. But the writers and artists never caused anyone any trouble.

The man who owned the land where the colony was located was the Writer-In-Residence at Nelson College, Noah Crisp. Noah had inherited an obscene amount of money from his mother and father; had published many books, but had never had a best-seller. As a matter of fact, since most of his books were so off-the-wall, so to speak, Noah paid for their publication. But since he was the nearest thing Logandale had to a celebrity, he became sort of an instructor at the college. The board felt that Noah's babblings really weren't harmful, since no one in control of their faculties would pay any attention to them anyway. His classes were usually titled under something like: The Transcendental Aspects of Creating Salable Fiction. Or, The Haruspextic Pitfalls of Writing.

Classes any serious student of writing should take. Surely.

Noah was fifty, a bit on the pudgy side, and wore a beret, of the type featured in the Village back in the early and mid-fifties, and usually wore a painter's smock over jeans and cowboy boots. To say

Noah was a bit eccentric would be putting it kindly. Many townspeople just called him a fucking nut and let it go at that.

As Monty drove the streets of the quiet little town, he recalled the visit by Noah, just a few weeks past. The man had not been his usual flaky self, not speaking in his usual pompous and/or condescending manner.

Monty had waved the small man to a seat.

Seated, Noah blurted, "Chief, are you a religious man?"

The question had caught Monty off balance. He had not expected that. Monty shook his head. "Not really. I was raised in the Catholic church, but I broke away from it years ago. While I was still in high school."

Noah nodded his head in understanding. "I, too, was raised in the church. But I haven't attended in years. Personal reasons. Chief, something very—strange is occurring in this town. I use that adverb in lieu of bizarre."

Monty elected not to tell Noah that strange was an adjective, not an adverb. He thought.

Monty waited.

"My dog disappeared, Chief."

Monty looked at the man.

"But I found him—yesterday."

"I'm ... glad, Noah. Do you consider your dog's disappearance bizarre?"

"What! Oh, no. Of course not. But I do consider it quite bizarre when the animal was tortured to death. Wouldn't you?"

"You want to go into more detail?"

Noah laid half a dozen Polaroid prints on the chiefs desk. Monty looked at them and felt like vomiting. The little dog had been hideously tortured, then patches of the animal had been skinned. Strange markings were cut into the skin. Alive, the thought came to Monty. The little animal was alive while this ... depravity was done. Monty lifted his eyes from the pictures of pain.

"Where did you find the animal, Noah?"

"About a mile from my home. Down a dirt road."

"What prompted you to look there?"

"Because I had looked everywhere else. Really. Victor, that's my dog's name—was his name, had a habit of running off quite often. But I always knew where to look for him. But this time, no Victor. So I began a systematic search for him. This spot," he said pointing to the prints, "was the last area in the quantum. I was—I became quite ill when I found him."

"That's understandable." Monty looked at the prints. Something was disturbingly familiar about the scene. But he couldn't pin it down.

"You look perplexed, Chief," Noah said.

Monty had mumbled something; he couldn't recall what. Now, driving the quiet streets of Logandale, it came to him: his sergeant handing out prints of a dead man found in an old condemned building. "We got us a bunch of Satan nuts," the sergeant said. "Coroner's office says the old guy was alive when this was done to him. Look at it real hard, boys and girls, and keep your heads up on this one."

That had been Monty's first year on the department. The pictures had made him violently ill.

And the same type of skinning had been done to Noah's dog; the same strange markings found on both the dog and the old man.

They never did find out who tortured and killed the old guy, but department shrinks said it definitely was the work of Satan worshippers.

Devil worshippers ... here in Logandale? Monty just could not accept that. College kids up to something.

He rolled down the window to catch some air.

The air was hot and smelled bad.

"What the hell?" Monty muttered. It had been cool for the past few weeks; now hot air that smelled bad. Last week in October and getting summertime weather that smelled worse than the Hudson. Didn't make sense.

That's when Monty heard the shouting.

The hand that touched Father Le Moyne's face was sticky with blood. When Le Moyne recovered sufficiently from his initial fright to run inside his quarters and grab a flashlight, he could see why the man was bloody.

The man was naked, his body covered with strange-looking cuts and slashings and markings. The man was bloody from his mouth to his toenails. Or where his toenails were supposed to be. Father Le Moyne tried to avert his eyes from the man's groin. The man had been castrated. Among other hideous acts. Covering the tortured body with his jacket, Father Le Moyne told him, "Lie still. I'll get help."

He ran back inside and jerked up the phone. The phone was dead. But it had been all right an hour before. "Damn!" the priest said. He ran out the side door of his quarters and toward the street.

The church was located on the edge of town, the nearest neighbor a full block away. The gas station across the street was closed. Le Moyne saw the lights of an approaching vehicle. He ran toward the street, waving his arms and shouting.

Monty slammed on his brakes and jumped out of the car. "Steady now, Father. What's the matter?"

Pulling the chief toward the church, the priest explained as best he could. Monty could not believe what the priest was saying. In New York, yeah, it would not even make the pages of the worst rag in town. It seemed to the rest of the nation—Monty had been told, many times—the people living and working in the Big Apple seemed more concerned about the rights of street slime than in the rights of the citizen. That wasn't true. But just try explaining that to a tourist with a busted head, minus his watch, ring, and wallet. And the punks that mugged him back out on the streets before the tourist is out of the emergency room.

Maybe there was some truth in it, Monty finally admitted privately.

The priest knew his story sounded far-fetched. He held out his hands to the cop. Monty looked at the dark blood and quickened his step.

"There!" Le Moyne pointed to the side of the church.

The ground was sticky with blood. The jacket the priest had used to cover the man was there, blood soaked. But the man was gone.

The Beasts feasted that evening. They tore the intestines from the tortured man's belly and ate them while steam rose from the man's open stomach. The Beasts ripped flesh from bone and devoured the sweet meat. They cracked open bone and sucked the marrow from it. One Beast contented herself with eating the flesh from the man's head, peeling the head like an orange, popping the eyeballs into her mouth like grapes. Then she ate the brain.

The few bones that were left were gathered and taken deep underground, through a hole behind the Catholic church. The hole had at one time been a well. It now connected with an elaborate labyrinth of underground tunnels. The tunnels crisscrossed under the entire town of Logandale, with exits under all church basements, the city hall, the police station, the sheriffs department substation, the public schools, many homes, and into the town's sewage system.

The digging and reenforcing of the tunnels had begun years before, back in 1948. For when one coven falls, as happened that year, in another part of the country, it is written in The Book that another must spring forth so the number will remain constant. The coven in Logandale was one of the oldest in the Northeast, and one of the largest. The coven in Logandale was almost ready to begin its full possession of the town. It was down to a matter of hours.

THREE

Father Daniel Le Moyne sat in Chief Draper's small office. He went over his story again ... and again. Monty could not break the priest's version. Not that he wanted to, or expected to, for he believed the

priest had seen exactly what he described.

"Do you want to go over it again, Monty?" the priest asked patiently.

"That won't be necessary, Father. I believe you saw a man. Hell, here's your bloody jacket. The ground was covered with blood. I have samples to send off to the lab. But what happened to the man?"

Father Le Moyne shrugged, shrugged as eloquently as only a Frenchman can; even a third generation American of French heritage.

"Father, let me ask you a question you—well, may think odd."

The priest waited.

Monty said, "I don't know how to put this except to just jump right in. But bear in mind I fully realize this is not a question you would expect to hear from a trained cop. Have you felt—*evil* in this town? I mean, especially over the past few weeks?"

Father Le Moyne lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He was thoughtful for a long moment, his eyes hooded with caution. Finally, he said, "Yes. I have."

The chief of police seemed to relax. "Care to elaborate, Father?"

"Are you asking if there is such a thing as varying degrees of evil?" The priest smiled.

"I was raised in the church, Father." Monty's response was dryly spoken.

"Your question about evil concerns the man I found this evening, correct?"

"Yes."

"The poor man had strange, bizarre markings cut into his flesh, Chief Draper."

Strange and bizarre, Monty thought. Those words keep cropping up. First from Noah, now from the priest. "Describe them, Father. We only touched on that."

The priest closed his eyes. When he spoke, his words were slow as he brought back the tortured man's condition. "Stars, moons, upside down crosses. Other symbols I—am not that familiar with. Some I have never seen at all. It looked as though the man had been tortured for several days. Some of the cuttings appeared to be crusted over; others were fresh. There were numbers cut into the poor man's flesh. Sixes and nines. I believe part of his tongue had been cut out. His words were so slurred. And as I told you previously, he had been castrated."

Le Moyne opened his eyes. Monty thought them to contain a haunting expression.

"What did the symbols mean to you, Father?"

Did the priest shudder? Monty thought so. "I— would rather not venture an opinion at this time, Chief. If you don't mind."

He knows, Monty thought. Knows more than he is telling me.

Without warning, Monty opened the center drawer of his desk and removed the prints of Noah's dog. He flipped them to the priest. Father Le Moyne took one look and covered his mouth in shock.

"What's the matter, Father?"

"That's obvious, isn't it? The poor animal. That's Noah's dog, Victor."

"I wasn't aware you two knew each other."

"The dog or Noah?" Le Moyne asked, with a sense of humor that surprised Monty.

"Go on, Father. But I am glad to see you have a sense of humor. It helps in times like these."

"Quite true," the priest responded, lighting another cigarette from the smoked-down butt of his first. "I have been in Logandale for a great many years, Monty, more than twenty-five. I know practically everyone within a ten mile radius of the town: Protestant, Catholic, Jew. I came here when I was barely thirty years of age. Been here ever since."

"You see, Monty, I am one of the few people who remember the real Noah Crisp. The man who could have been a truly great author. But that was before—well, his breakdown, to put it as kindly as possible."

This was something Monty had never heard. "I always thought Noah was—well, just a little on the strange side." That word again. Strange.

"No. That isn't a fair or accurate portrayal of the real man. Noah was brilliant when I first met him. A deeply religious man, and, I think, perhaps on the edge of great literary success. Then one night—no, it was early evening—he came to me with this idea for a manuscript. He was going to write a book about the occult. The Devil. A fiction book. In it, he was going to kill Satan."

"I'm not saying there haven't been writers who wrote of killing Satan, but I can't recall ever reading one of their books. You see, Monty, Satan, like God, is immortal—no human can kill either. I told Noah that; begged him not to write the manuscript. Warned him of the danger of his project. He waved my objections aside. Then Noah became obsessed with his work. He stopped coming to Mass; broke all ties with God. He practically barricaded himself in his house—his parents were killed when he was just a little boy—and Noah seldom came out of the house during this period of— Devil research. He conducted all sorts of Black Masses and the calling out of witches and warlocks. He conducted lone seances. He became quite the expert on Satan."

The priest's gentle features hardened for a moment. "Then—one night, just after midnight, I believe it was, my phone rang. To this day I do not know who the caller was, but it was about Noah. Noah was running around on his property, stark naked, shouting that he had seen the face of Satan; that he had talked with the Dark One. It is

written, Monty, by men much more versed in the subject than I, that if one sees the face of the Prince of Darkness, that person dies. Noah was very lucky—in a manner of speaking. He's alive. But he was a broken man, mentally and physically. He spent two years in a mental institution, another five years in deep analysis. Noah will never write another worthwhile book—about anything."

Monty was silent for a moment, mentally digesting all the priest had said. "You believe he saw the devil?"

"I—believe he saw something. Yes. Yes, I believe Noah Crisp met with the Dark One."

"Then you really, truly believe in the supernatural?"

"Yes, Monty. I do."

"You really believe the devil has—followers, covens, if you will; people who are really, actually in touch with the forces of the—well, beyond?"

"With all my heart and faith."

"Jesus!" Monty muttered. "Father Le Moyne, have you ever performed or been a witness to an exorcism?"

Without hesitation, the priest said, "Yes. To both your questions."

"Here in Logandale?"

The priest struggled with that for a moment. "I—can't answer that, Monty. I'm sorry."

The cop surfaced in Monty, and he knew the priest had performed the rite of exorcism in Logandale. But out of respect for the man—and, he would readily admit, fear stemming from his early teachings in the church—he would not press the man for an answer. Monty leaned back in his swivel chair. "So my feelings that something—evil was hovering over this town were correct?"

"Yes."

"Has it, in your opinion, become stronger during the past few weeks?"

The priest met the cop's eyes. "Yes," he said softly. "Quite a bit, I would say."

The weekend dawned gloriously, with the touch of approaching winter cooling the morning air. It was a morning for woolen skirts and shirts; the type of fall morning that makes a hearty breakfast more appealing to the palate. Steam colored the air white at the expulsion of breath. Kids jumped and ran and played in the coolness of this Saturday morning in upstate New York. People busied themselves raking up the multicolored leaves that fell in profusion, painting the landscape a joyous color of bronze and gold and green and red.

But for most of the people in Logandale, the acts were superficial, disguising the evil that lay bubbling just under the human surface.

The evil that blanketed the area would soon burst forth, showering all who came close with its stinking pus of depravity.

And ... it was also the Saturday morning that Judith Mayberry found young Marie Fowler hanging upside down in the apple grove behind her house. Hanging by her ankles. Marie was naked. Or perhaps it would be better to say what was left of Marie who was naked. Certain parts of her anatomy had been quite crudely hacked off. Definitely not the work of a skilled surgeon.

Judith, when she recovered from her fainting, thought she'd better call the police. She was not conscious of eyes watching her movements from the homes around her. Eyes that contained evil in its blackest form. Judith was on her way to the house when she heard the low growl behind her. Judith Mayberry turned around for the last time—in her human form—and froze rock-still in shock.

She dropped the basket of late-blooming wild flowers she had just picked to decorate her kitchen table.

She opened her mouth to shriek out her fright when a pawlike hand clamped around her left ankle and jerked. Another pawlike hand dropped over her mouth, stilling her yet unleashed howl of terror. She was dragged to a thicket that ran on the north side of the orchard and pulled down into the earth through a hole she never knew existed. When Judith came to her senses she was naked and cold and wished she were dead.

She soon would be. Sort of.

Judith was thirty-six years old, and while no one would ever call her beautiful, she was attractive, with long legs and full breasts. The attractive part of her was about to undergo a drastic metamorphosis. She sat on the cold rocky floor of the cave, or tunnel, or whatever the hell it was—she wasn't certain—and looked at the Beasts who sat squatting, looking at her.

She had never seen such horrible-looking creatures in all her life. Not even in the movies.

An old Beast—one might call him a silver-back—grunted a command. Two younger Beasts seized Judith and forced her to a knees-and-hands position, her buttocks elevated.

The old silver-back then mounted her.

Judith began screaming out her pain and outrage.

The old Beast bit her on the neck several times as he mated with her.

When the sex act was over, Judith was allowed to crawl into a corner of the huge cave room and huddle in pain and shock. After only a very short time, Judith wondered why she was suddenly getting warmer. She looked at the back of her hands. Thick coarse hair was sprouting, not just on the back of her hands but all over her body.

Her face, especially her jaw, was beginning to ache. Her teeth felt odd to her. She ran her tongue over her teeth and found they were fanged. And now, as the rapid change spread over her entire body, it did not seem odd to her. Her jaw swelled to accommodate the new growth of teeth.

Several of the Beasts were talking, and Judith found she could understand them. She crawled over to them and they welcomed her.

She was one with them.

She tossed her head, glad of her new strength and body. One earring gleamed dully in the gloom of the cave room, as it remained pierced in place.

All that was left of the woman once known as Judith Mayberry.

"Sam?" Nydia called to him on this glorious Saturday morning.

The two of them were working out in the yard; more specifically, working by the fence that separated their property from a field to the northeast. Sam straightened from his work to look at his wife.

She stood very still, her face suddenly pale. She was pointing toward the old orchard.

Sam looked. He could see nothing. "Nydia?"

"I—saw something move over there." She again pointed her finger. "Then it just disappeared into the ground, like the earth swallowed it."

Sam knew Nydia was not the type to panic. They had both been through too much horror for that. And if she said she saw something, she saw it, and that was it.

"Let's go take a look," Sam said.

"No," she replied. She put out a hand to stop him. "Sam—it's them." Her eyes were now wide and frightened.

"Them?"

"The Beasts, Sam. They're back. They're here. They found us, Sam."

"Nydia—" He opened his mouth to calm her.

"I know what I saw, Sam."

He believed her. He walked to her, took her hand, and they started toward the house. "Stay with Little Sam. You have your pistol; you know how to use it."

There was no fear in the tall young man. He had faced the Beasts before. He had faced almost everything Satan could hurl at him in black fury. And he had been victorious. While it was something he hoped he would never have to do again, if it had to be, then so be it.

In his heart, Sam had always known he would be called upon to fight again.

Sam unlocked his gun cabinet. Chief of Police Draper had visited the Balon house several times, enjoying the young man's company for one thing, but the main reason for the visits was that the young man

fascinated Monty. He had no past that police computers could punch up, other than the most mundane. And Monty Draper, with a cop's instinct, knew there was much more to Sam Balon.

Chief of Police Draper always shook his head and clucked his tongue at the sight of Sam's arsenal. He was like any good liberal New Yorker who had grown up under the most asinine of gun control laws: The Sullivan Act. While Sam displayed no illegal weapons (those were carefully hidden), the weapons visible were awesome. Of course a cap pistol is frightening to many screaming liberals.

Sam was his father's image, physically and mentally. He stood well over six feet tall, stocky, with a naturally heavy musculature. His hair was dark brown and usually unmanageable. His jaw square. And he despised even the thought of any type of gun control.

"If I ever need a one-man riot squad," Monty had remarked dryly, "I certainly know where to come."

"At your service, Chief," Sam had cheerfully replied.

His curiosity heightened by the sight of the most impressive arsenal he'd seen since leaving the NYPD, Chief Draper ran—or attempted to run—a check on the young man named Sam Balon.

He found out what almost anyone could have discovered. The young man had graduated from high school in Whitfield, Nebraska (why did that name ring some sort of bell in Monty's mind, he wondered?) Sam had been an honor student, his mother a teacher, his step-father a doctor. His real father had been killed back in 1958. Sam Balon King—he had since dropped the King—had spent three years in the army, a member of the Rangers.

And there the information stopped. Dead. Cold.

Monty had run into a stone wall.

He called old friends on the NYPD and asked them to run young Mr. Sam Balon. Run him hard, push for answers. Call in markers if they had to.

He received a phone call late that same afternoon from a precinct captain.

"Monty," the captain had shouted in his ear through the long lines. "What the goddamn hell are you trying to pull up there in that hick town?"

Monty was speechless for a few seconds. "Captain—what do you mean?" Monty had known the man for years.

"Sam Balon King. That's what I mean. Why are you running this guy so hard?"

Monty came very close to losing his temper. "Well—goddamn it, Captain, because I want a make on him, that's why."

"Not good enough, Monty." The man was adamant. "What's the guy done to warrant all this attention?"

Monty had never before encountered this much stonewalling. "Nothing," he admitted. "That I can prove. Except he's got the finest collection of guns I've ever seen in the hands of any civilian. Especially one this young."

Down in New York City, the captain's sigh was audible up in Logandale. "Monty, my boy, listen to me. I won't bullshit you. Get off this young man's back. I've had CID and CIA and FBI and NSC people all over my ass this afternoon. Whatever this Sam Balon King did in the paratroops, it was something special."

"Rangers," Monty corrected.

"Haw?"

"The guy was in the Rangers, Captain."

"I thought those people took care of trees!"

"I think these Rangers eat the goddamn trees, Captain."

"It wouldn't surprise me, Monty."

"And they are trained to kill."

Another long sigh from the Big Apple. "Yeah? Well, so are Green Berets, marine Raiders, navy Seals, and lots of other service people. Not to mention the Mafia and other assorted crazies running around. Whatever, Monty. This kid is to be left *alone*. Just drop it, Chief Draper. For your own good and my peace of mind."

"You can't tell me anything else, Captain?"

"No."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Take your pick, Chief."

"Good talking to another member of the law enforcement field, Captain."

The line went dead.

So the mystery—if there was any mystery about Sam Balon, and Monty felt there was—was never cleared up to Monty's satisfaction. But it would be cleared up. Shortly.

Sam took a Winchester Model 1200 from the gun cabinet and filled up the tube with double 00 buck. He pumped one into the chamber. He took a .41 magnum revolver from the cabinet and checked the loads in that. Fully loaded. He shoved the big pistol behind his belt and turned to his wife.

"Stay in the house with Little Sam. You have your pistol with you and you know how to fire every weapon in this house." He smiled. "Well, *almost* every weapon. And I know you will if you have to. I'll be back in a little while."

Sam walked out the back door and started across the field. It was then the faint odor struck his nostrils. Nydia had been correct. The Beasts were here. He remembered that smell from behind Falcon

House in Canada.

Sam and Nydia were falling in love. They both knew they were in love hours after they met.

They had left Falcon House, walking toward the deep timber behind the great house, holding hands like kids. They walked into the timber, and the silence of God's free nature seemed to make them stronger and draw them closer. The mood was almost religious, the towering trees a nondenominational cathedral silently growing around the young couple. They came to a small, rushing creek and sat on a log by the bubbling waters.

"Tell me more about being a Christian, Sam."

"I don't know that much about it, Nydia. I sometimes think it's a feeling one must have. And I don't have it very often."

"I think you're a better person than you will admit to being, Sam."

"Maybe."

They sat and talked and both felt the evil from the great house. It penetrated even the deep timber. Nydia told him about a circle of stones not too far away, a place that frightened her. Sam wanted to see that place.

At the circle of stones, Sam knelt down, studying closely and with great interest the largest stone of the circle, which depicted scenes of great depravity: of men with huge jutting phalluses; of women with legs widespread, exposing the genitalia; scenes of mass orgies: men with men, women with women, men with small children; scenes of hideous torture; of grotesque creatures, monsters, leaping and snarling. And finally, on the east side of the great stone, a scene depicting a saintly looking man who was locked in some sort of combat with a beastlike creature.

"Let's see this hole in the ground," Sam said.

They smelled the stench long before they came to the hole, both of them wrinkling their noses at the foul odor. "Can you imagine what it's like deep in that hole?" Sam tried a grin, unaware that his real father had said almost the same thing to a couple of friends back in 1958, standing near The Digging. (The Devil's Kiss).

It was then Sam had put his hand into his jacket pocket, jerking his hand out as if he had touched a snake.

His father's old army issue .45 was in his pocket. But before leaving his room at Falcon House that morning, Sam had put his own .38 revolver in that pocket.

Sam and Nydia looked at the pistol. A brass name-plate was riveted into the handle. SGT. SAM BALON KOREA 1953.

The young couple both felt themselves being overwhelmed by a dark force field. They sank to the ground, helplessly immobile as the

strange force took them under its control.

Time took them winging backward. They watched a naked man fighting with a naked woman. Both Sam and Nydia knew, somehow, the identities of the couple. Sam Balon, Sr. and Nydia's mother, Roma, the witch.

Articles of clothing and equipment flew about the struggling couple. Both were bloody from the combat. The woman impaled herself on the man's erect penis, hunching on him. He struck her, knocking her away. But again and again she mounted the man, only to have him shove her away, each shove less forceful than the preceding one.

Then, shrieking her taunting laughter, the witch lunged at the man, wailing her delight as his phallus drove to the inner depths of her. For what seemed like hours, the mortal and the witch fucked their way across trackless worlds of space.

The young couple could see the man was nearly dead.

With one last supreme burst of courage and strength, the man grabbed something out of the maze of clothing and equipment that circled the couple. The objects seemed to fly from his hand, through the years, straight toward the young man and young women frozen to the ground on Earth, 1980.

Nydia screamed. Sam ducked.

They both jumped to their feet. All was peaceful. The scene replayed in their minds was gone. Sam looked at the gun in his hand. His father's gun. From years and worlds away.

When they returned to Falcon House, Sam found his father's old Thompson SMG lying on the bed.

Sam shook off the memories and walked across the old apple orchard, his irritation growing with each step. The smell grew fouler. Twice Sam changed direction as the smell grew fainter. Then he was standing over the hole in the ground. He picked up a rock from the ground and savagely hurled it down the stinking hole.

"Bastards!" he cursed. "I know, somehow, you didn't follow us here, so you must have been here all along. Come on out, bastards—face me."

Only silence greeted his words.

"Satan's filth!" Sam called to the dark hole.

Silence.

The wind sighed as it shifted direction. Sam looked around him. The old orchard was void of life. That he could see.

Then he began putting it all together. This hole was not the entrance to any living quarters for the Beasts, but only an exit and entrance hole. He thought for a moment. The land belonged to Norman Giddon; the man who owned the mansion that bordered Fox

Estate. "Uh-huh," Sam said. "And the new girl, Desiree, her parents own Fox Estate. Cute. Odds are, she's one of them."

In the two years that Sam and Nydia had lived next to the old orchard, he had never seen Norman Giddon or any of his company trucks or cars even so much as drive past. The land had once been productive; now it lay barren.

Sam wondered why.

Then the wind once more shifted direction, bringing with it a smell that touched and raised the short hairs on the back of Sam's neck.

The Beasts were close. The smell was stronger than ever. Sam looked up to the Heavens. "I know you're not with me on this one, Dad. I'm on my own, right?"

The skies remained mute.

"It's all up to me this time, huh, Dad?"

The silence prevailed. The wind from the north had ceased. Sam could not hear one audible sound. Not a car, truck, nothing at all.

He turned slowly in a circle. He could see nothing to alarm him. But he knew the Beasts were very close; he could sense them as well as smell their odious presence.

It was an aura of evil.

The Dark One is here, Sam thought. Satan is very near. The Beasts have been here—these Beasts—for a long time. So that means Logandale has been chosen by the Prince of Darkness for his own.

Sam's smile was a mixture of sadness and understanding as he contemplated his future, and Nydia and Little Sam's future. He would have to pay the local priest a visit. Father Le Moyne appeared to be a sensible, levelheaded person. He had no doubts but that when he laid it on the line for the priest his story would be believed. Chief Monty Draper would be quite another story.

Sam could almost hear the laughter of the chief.

"Til be back," he spoke to the almost tangible evil that clung to the trees and rocks of the orchard. "Bet on it."

The wind sighed in reply.

It was a hot stinking wind.

FOUR

Chief Monty Draper looked again at the body of the young woman and once more felt like tossing up his breakfast. Marie Fowler had stiffened in death and was becoming a bit on the smelly side. He fought back his sickness.

Monty looked at Sheriff Jenkins, looking at him.

Clark County was a large county, but it was one of the smallest in population. Half of the county was set within the borders of the Adirondack Park, about forty miles from the Canadian border. It was, for all intents and purposes, a peaceful county. The county liked to boast of its good fishing and skiing. One rather well-known ski lodge operated within the county. And there hadn't been a murder in Clark County in two years. Not since those doped up skiers had been found in a naked jumble of sex by the boyfriend of one of the young ladies caught up in the orgy and hauled out a pistol and started blasting away.

Sheriff Jenkins often expressed the opinion that anyone who would kill someone else over pussy was an idiot. Too much stuff prancing around just waiting for a stiff pecker.

Sheriff Jenkins turned his gaze from Monty to a deputy. "You got your pictures, Ed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then somebody cut the poor girl down and cover her up, for God's sake." His voice sounded too loud, too false, too protesting. Shakespeare came to Monty's mind. Pat Jenkins looked back at Monty. "This happen over at Lecoy or Woodburn or Aumsville, Chief, those guys would be running all over the place in a panic, stomping all over the physical evidence and making damn fools of themselves. But I guess you saw worse than this in the big city, right?"

"Yes," Monty said. "I did. Sheriff, the only physical evidence I found was a basket and a scattering of freshly picked wild flowers."

"Yeah, I know," the sheriff replied glumly. Why did Monty think it was an act? And why? "And if you didn't find nothing, Monty, not much point in my boys covering the same ground."

Not very professional of you, sheriff, Monty thought. What the hell is wrong around here? Monty could not shake the feeling. Something is *just not right!*

"What do you make of it, Monty?" Sheriff Jenkins asked.

Monty was careful in his reply. He thought of the priest's description of the cuttings and markings on the man Le Moyne had found. Same markings on the dead girl. He decided he would not tell the sheriff of that. Not just yet. Of course, Monty thought, he could be way off base about this whole thing.

"I think we got a problem," he said.

The sheriff's smile contained a hidden meaning. Monty picked up on it but did not know what it meant. "You care to elaborate, Monty? That we got a problem is obvious."

Don't tell him! That leaped suddenly into Monty's brain. "The girl was tortured; cut many times with a sharp instrument." He would not be the one to bring up strange markings. If the sheriff didn't mention

it, then that would prove to Monty that something odd indeed was going on. "The girl's genital area was mangled." Monty chose his words very cautiously. "She was raped; no doubt about that."

"By one big-hung sucker," a sheriff's deputy said with a nasty grin.

"Yeah," the sheriff said, a grin slipping onto his lips. It faded as quickly as it came. "Go on, Monty."

The sheriff thought rape amusing. Yeah, Monty thought. About as amusing as a crutch. And the deputy, Vernon Parish, was behaving even more oddly than ever.

Vernon was the locally based deputy. He did not like the chief of police and the feeling was very mutual. Vernon was poorly educated and a cruel and sarcastic man. He was not a good deputy, but was well liked by most in the community. And that was something that Monty could never understand, for the man was too heavy-handed in the few arrests he did make.

Personally, Monty thought the deputy an asshole. That feeling worsened when Monty learned the man abused his wife, slapping her around from time to time. Vernon was fond of saying, "Got to keep the broads in line, you know."

He also beat his kids, sometimes savagely. His son, Fred, was a sullen, uncommunicative boy. His daughters, Judy and Anne, were pretty girls, and, as far as Monty could determine, good kids. He felt sorry for Vernon's wife, Susie.

Monty said, "She was tortured and beaten and God only knows what else. But not around this area." Why did I say that? he thought. "She was brought in here and strung up."

Again, he thought: why did I say that when I don't believe it?

"By more than one person?" Jenkins asked.

"By several, would be my guess."

"Why was it done to her?" Jenkins pressed.

Monty shrugged. Forces battled within him. Suddenly, he did not trust Sheriff Pat Jenkins. Suddenly, Monty didn't know who to trust. Or why he felt that way.

He loaded his next comment. "I think it was done by a bunch of crazies; probably all doped up. And I don't believe it was done by local people. I think they did the deed and then moved on. I doubt we'll ever find out for sure."

Was it Monty's imagination, or did Sheriff Jenkins suddenly relax. No, it wasn't his imagination. The sheriff seemed looser, calmer.

Monty caught Deputy Parish looking at him, a strange sort of smile on his face. A smile of ... satisfaction. Yes. That was it.

Something odd going on around here. Something between Jenkins and his deputy. But what? Monty mused.

He didn't know.

And he was oddly afraid of finding out.

"You a damn good cop, Monty," Sheriff Jenkins said. Was that a smirk on his face? Yes, Monty thought. It was. "A damn fine cop. I think you hit the nail right on the head on this one. Sure do. We'll just leave it at that; maybe let the state boys handle it. They like all that gory stuff. Don't you worry about any report, Monty. I'll take care of all the paperwork." The sheriff left.

I'll just bet you will, Pat, Monty thought. I just bet you will.

The body of Marie Fowler was loaded into the back of an ambulance. A blanket covered her tortured body. The driver headed for the county seat, Blaine. Only five towns in Clark County: Blaine, the biggest town, followed by Lecoy, Woodburn, Aumsville, and Logandale.

The big hospital that served the entire county was located in Blaine, although Logandale and Woodburn did have very respectable clinics and several good doctors.

Vernon looked at Chief Draper, and, without speaking, strolled off, got in his county car, and pulled out. Monty stood in the middle of the orchard with one of his men, Joe Bennett.

"Chief?"

Monty glanced at the man.

"I don't like none of this worth a shit."

"Neither do I, Joe," Monty admitted. "But keep that to yourself. I'm getting—bad vibes about this whole thing."

"Yeah. Me, too."

Monty looked toward the Mayberry house. "Odd," he said.

"What's that, Chief?"

"All this activity and Judith hasn't made an appearance. Or no one else, for that matter. Don't you find that strange?" That word again.

"I was thinking the same thing. It ain't like these folks."

"Let's go up to the house."

Some people claim they can sense when a home is empty. That the home emits a lonely type of force, or message. Whether or not there is any truth in that, both cops felt better when they rested their hands on the butt of their pistols.

"I just don't like the feeling I'm getting, Chief. I just flat don't like it."

"I know the feeling, Joe. But settle down. Seeing that Fowler girl has unsettled you."

"Something sure as hell has," the cop admitted.

Monty knocked on the back door. After a moment, he told Joe to stay there while he went around to the front. The front door was locked.

"Joe!" he called. "See if the back door is locked."

"It ain't," Joe returned the shout.

Together, with Monty leading, the men entered the silent house. They noticed the electric coffee brewer, still on, a full pot of coffee. Strips of bacon laid out in an iron skillet, uncooked. A setting for one at the kitchen table, unused.

For the moment, the men went no further than the kitchen. Both of them experienced the hard sensation of something being very wrong.

"Take the house to the left, Joe," Monty said. "I'll check the one to the right. Ask if anyone saw Miss Mayberry today."

"Something awful wrong in town, Chief. And I mean the whole town."

"I know, Joe. You haven't mentioned to anybody about what Father Le Moyne saw last night, have you?"

"Not a word, Chief."

"O.K. Let's go."

"Yes, Chief," a lady said. "I saw her earlier this morning, out in the orchard, picking wildflowers. But that's the only time I saw her."

The lady could definitely use a good scrubbing, Monty thought. She smelled very bad. Come to think of it, Monty mused, a lot of folks around town the last three-four days have needed a good bath. Strange. Damn! that word again.

So the basket and the flowers did belong to Judith. But where was Judith?

And the smelly lady showed absolutely no interest in what had just transpired in the orchard. Strange. Crap! Come on, Monty—find another word.

"Ah—Mrs. Clemmings, you haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary this morning, have you?"

"Not a thing, Chief. I've been here all morning. Haven't seen a thing."

Somehow, her reply was not unexpected to Monty. "I see," he said slowly. "You didn't notice large groups of men, an ambulance, nothing like that?"

"Why—no, Chief," she said.

What was wrong with her eyes. They seemed so . . . so dull and lifeless.

"Thank you, Mrs. Clemmings. You've been very helpful." And for God's sake, lady, take a bath! You're a one-woman hog pen.

Monty walked slowly to the rear of the Mayberry house. The woman had seen or heard *nothing*! Four police and sheriffs department vehicles and one ambulance, and the woman had heard *nothing*. He knew she wasn't deaf; she had admitted being in the house all morning. So that left one alternative: she was lying.

But why?

He looked up to watch Joe walking slowly toward him, a very puzzled expression on his face. Monty felt he knew the reason for the puzzlement.

"Chief, either we got the most unobservant and deafest folks in all of northern New York State, or we got a bunch of bald-faced liars. Take your pick. And these folks are beginning to stink like polecats."

"I know what you mean, Joe. Nobody has seen or heard a thing. Strange." That word again. Monty made a mental note to avoid using it.

"Strange isn't the word I'd use, Chief."

"Oh?"

"Weird."

"Yes. That, too. Let's take a walk in the orchard before we prowl the house. I want to go over every inch of that old orchard."

"What are we looking for?" Monty glanced at the man. Joe was more than his assistant; the men were good friends. Joe was the oldest and most stable of all Monty's men. "I don't know, Joe. I just don't know."

In the rolling ambulance, beneath the blanket that covered her tortured and mangled body, Marie Fowler twitched her fingers. She opened her eyes. They were not the eyes of the living. They were dull, unfeeling, evil eyes of the undead.

Marie felt no pain. She was no longer of the living world. Her body had not yet been washed of the blood that streaked her marked nakedness, so no one among the police or the paramedics had noticed the tiny fang marks on her neck. They were her vaccination against almost everything pertaining to the human side of living.

Marie was weak. She had lost much blood, and her new form of unlife craved the hot, salty taste of fresh, living blood. She was fully cognizant of what had happened to her; fully aware of her new life-form. She harbored no ill will toward those that changed the direction of her human life, for in this form, she would know eternal life, barring no unforeseen difficulties, such as humans wielding pointed stakes or holy water.

She pushed the blanket from her and wrapped herself in a hospital gown. She looked around. The driver and his partner were chatting. Marie smiled; a grotesque grimace, exposing teeth that had become pointed. Her lips were chalk white, her tongue a swollen bright red.

She opened the partition.

The men turned around.

"Hello," Marie said.

The men began screaming.

"Father Le Moyne?" Sam asked when the door opened.

"Yes," the priest said.

"I'm Sam Balon. This is my wife, Nydia. May we come in? I'd—we'd like very much to talk with you."

The priest looked at the young couple. Good-looking young man, very beautiful young woman. He looked at them for a long moment. The moment he had dreaded had arrived. Thank God in human form. Father Le Moyne longed desperately to close the door to his small living quarters. Wanted to shut out the young couple. But he knew he could not do that.

"You're here to tell me the Devil is in Logandale." It was not a question.

"Yes, sir," Sam replied. "I've fought him before, just as my Dad did back in '58. We both beat him—in a manner of speaking—and I feel I can do it again."

Father Le Moyne's knees felt weak; made of rubber. He did not know if they would support his weight. He leaned against the door jamb for a few seconds. With a deep sigh, and an inner plea for forgiveness from the Lord for his doubts, Father Le Moyne straightened up and reluctantly waved the young couple inside.

When they were seated, Le Moyne said, "Have you heard about the poor Fowler girl?"

Sam and Nydia said they had not.

Le Moyne told them.

"I'm surprised the Beasts didn't eat her," Sam said. "Unless they have other plans for her."

Le Moyne could detect no fear or surprise in the young man's reply.

"The Beasts? Other plans?"

Sam leaned forward, Nydia holding onto his hand. "Father Le Moyne, I'm going to tell you a story that you are going to find very hard to believe."

"No," the priest said with an almost painful sigh. "I've known the Dark One was near; knew the time would come when I would have to face him."

"That time is here, Father," Nydia said. The priest closed his eyes. "Tell me your story, Mr. Balon."

"There's a hole in the ground over here," Joe called. "All covered over with brush. And God, does it stink."

Monty walked across the orchard to stand by Joe. His nose wrinkled at the foul odor coming from the hole in the earth. "Jesus H. Christ! What would cause a smell like that?"

"I ain't never smelled anything like that, Chief. And I worked in the mines down in Kentucky as a kid, 'fore my daddy moved us all up here. I thought I'd done smelled everything God could possibly put in

the ground, but nothing like this here."

"I thought you were a native, Joe," Monty said with a smile.

"Sure you did. 'Way I talk? I think like a native, but I ain't. I was fifteen when my dad brung us up here. I've lived here forty years."

The men looked down into the dark hole. A glint of something metallic caught Monty's eyes. It gleamed from just inside the yawning hole. With Joe holding on to his ankles to keep him from tumbling into the darkness, Monty retrieved the piece of jewelry. An earring.

"You reckon that's Miss Mayberry's?" Joe asked.

"I'd bet on it. And I'd also bet the neighbors aren't going to tell us a thing."

"You and me both, Chief. Don't turn around, but there's a face at damn near every window back of us. We're being watched real close."

"What the hell is going on in this town, Joe?"

"I don't know, Chief. But I get the feeling it's—don't laugh at me, now—evil."

"That's as good a word as any, Joe. Did Miss Mayberry socialize much?"

Joe smiled. "I wouldn't want to say she was gettin' any on a regular basis, but she's been seein' that ol' boy owns the hardware store. Will Gibson."

"Let's go pay Mr. Gibson a visit."

"I'm ridin' with you, Chief."

The paramedics were found sitting in their ambulance, halfway between Logandale and Blaine. The body of Marie Fowler was not in the ambulance. Since the highway cop who found the ambulance and the dead men knew nothing of their mission, he did not find it odd no one was in the rear of the ambulance. He had looked, but the stretcher did not appear mussed. The paramedics' logbook was missing, so the highway cop could not check that. He did not call in to Clark County because the men were taking a short cut and were in McGray County when whatever happened to them occurred. It was an independently owned ambulance service, so the hospital at Blaine would know nothing of Marie Fowler.

But what did appear odd to the highway patrolman was the condition of the men. There was not a mark on either of them that he could see. But they were so pale-looking. It looked as though there was not a drop of blood left in either man. But there was no blood anywhere in or around the ambulance.

The highway cop stood looking at the men, a perplexed look on his face. He radioed the McGray County Sheriffs Department. They notified the coroner. But he and his small staff were up to their elbows doing an autopsy on an entire family that had been found dead in

their van, parked on the edge of the park. The M.E. felt sure they had all died of carbon monoxide poisoning, but he still had to open them all up. And to complicate matters further, a lot of drugs had been discovered in the van. Of the recreational variety rather than medical type.

"Stick them in the cooler," the M.E. told his assistant. "We'll get to them Monday or Tuesday. Damn this Saturday work."

The assistant took a look at the bodies of the paramedics. He had never seen anything quite like them. "So pale," he muttered. "Almost as if they had no blood in them."

"What'd you say, Max?"

"Oh—nothing."

"Come look at the liver on this guy," the M.E. said. "He must have consumed a quart of booze a day. Liver's hard as a piece of leather."

As Max dropped the sheet back over the ambulance driver, he did not notice the man's eyelids fluttering as new life rose to the surface.

"Yes," Will Gibson said, handing the earring back to the chief. "That belongs to Judith. Why are you asking me these questions, Chief Draper?"

"You've heard about Marie?"

"Yes. A terrible thing. Human animals roaming society. People who would do something like that should be shot on sight. But you don't think Judith had anything to do with the Fowler girl, do you?"

"Oh, no, Will. It's just we can't find Judith, and we want to talk to her. She might have seen something that would be of importance to the case."

But Will wasn't buying that. "Something's happened to her, hasn't it, Chief?"

"Will—" Joe said.

"No. Now you people level with me. If something has happened to Judith, I want to know. I have a right to know."

"All right, Will," Monty said. "We found this earring just inside the mouth of a hole on her property. In the orchard. I'm going to get a search team together; ask for volunteers. I—"

"I am a longtime spelunker, Chief. There is no one more qualified in this town. Let me get my gear together and I'll go down in the hole."

Monty sighed. But he knew the man was right. Will Gibson had crawled around every cave and hole in the ground he could find in the state of New York. "All right, Will. I'll meet you out there in half an hour. But I will insist upon you being attached to a rope and be in radio contact with me."

"Sometimes radios don't work down there, Chief. Not for any distance."

"Those are the terms of the deal, Will."

"All right, Chief. I have no objections to that."

Monty's car radio was squawking when the men returned to the police car. "Logandale One," Monty said. "Come in."

"Chief, what is your ten-twenty?"

"In front of the hardware store."

"Was that ambulance that took the Fowler girl into Blaine a hospital rig?"

"You mean belonging to the hospital?"

"Right."

"Negative. The independent service out of Aumsville. Don't know why Jenkins called that one."

"Ah—O.K., Chief. Can you ten-nineteen?"

"On my way."

"What the hell?" Joe muttered.

"Don't know. So let's go find out."

Father Le Moyne stood gazing out his living room window. He had heard all the young couple had told him, but he found it difficult to believe. He knew in his heart, though, it was true. He turned slowly. "Whitfield was where that giant meteor struck several years ago, destroying the entire town, killing everyone in it."

"That was not just a meteor, Father."

"Are you telling me—"

"It was the hand of God."

Le Moyne crossed himself, his eyes closed. "And the poor Fowler girl is a part of all this?"

"That poor Fowler girl, as you put it, Father, may now be a part of the living dead," Nydia said.

"I cannot accept that premise, Nydia," the priest spoke sharply. "I do not believe in vampires or zombies. Possession, of course. But it ends there."

"You're wrong, Father," Sam spoke bluntly. Another trait he had inherited from his father. "Would you like for us to show you?"

"I—" The priest hesitated.

"Why are you afraid, Father?" Nydia asked, tilting her head to one side, brushing back a strand of midnight hair that fell over one eye each time she did so.

The priest glanced at her. "Perhaps, Mrs. Balon, I know things about Satan you do not."

"I'm sure you do, Father. But I can assure you I have been on a much more intimate basis with the Devil's workers than you."

"How do you mean, child?"

Nydia met his gaze and said bluntly, "A warlock raped me."

Roma had won. She had managed to seduce young Sam—at the orders of Satan—thus guaranteeing a demon child would be born from Sam's seed. She had done so by trickery, placing Nydia in a state of suspending animation. Sam believed her dead.

Upon reentering Falcon House, Sam had followed the sound of sad funeral music. Upstairs, Nydia lay in a coffin. Weeping and sobbing people lined the room. They had—to a person—told Sam they wanted to accept Christ into their hearts, and turn their backs on the Devil. In his confused state, Sam believed them. He allowed Roma to set him on a couch, the witch beside him. He did not know her perfume was drugged with a powerful ancient aphrodisiac. He fell prey to its black power.

Sam was conscious of cool air on his groin, but he felt it wasn't worth the effort to open his eyes and look. He realized his underwear shorts had been removed. That seemed all right to the young man.

Roma touched his groin, brought him to stiffness. She brought him almost to the point of ejaculation with her skillful fingers. Then, with one swift movement, the witch mounted him, laughing as she did so.

Everything returned to Sam, coming in such a rush it almost overpowered him: the warnings he had received from his dead father; the sight of his father struggling with the witch through boundless space. This woman! Roma was the woman his father had been fighting.

Young Sam began struggling with the witch, attempting to dislodge her from his erection. Her strength was incredible. He exploded within her. She milked him of every drop of semen. Leaving the young man exhausted and confused on the couch, Roma padded naked to a table and drank deeply from a small bottle of fresh blood.

Sam was too weak to move as she began speaking in a language he could not understand. She was calling on the forces of the Dark One, the incantation evil as it rolled from her tongue. Lightning licked around the mansion, thunder boomed, ripping the countryside, the smell of burning sulphur strong in the stormy air.

Laughter reached Sam's ears, spilling from the room where Nydia lay in her coffin. Dead, or so Sam thought. He stumbled into the room.

The scene that greeted his eyes was of the vilest imaginable: Nydia had been lifted from the casket, pillows placed under her. She was naked in death, her lifeless white arms hanging over the sides of the coffin. Her legs were widespread, knees to feet hanging out of the coffin. Falcon was between her legs, his gross maleness swollen to full erection. He was fucking the dead girl.

Sam shouted his rage and charged toward the sickness. Someone

tripped him, sending him sprawling on the floor. He was kicked and beaten into semiconsciousness, vaguely aware of the hideous necrophilia before his eyes.

Nydia's head was thrown back, her mouth open, a gaping black hole, eyes closed in surrender on her voyage to the stygian shore.

Sam could but lay helpless, bloodied and weak on the floor, watching through a red mist as Falcon rammed his long thickness into the dead flesh of Nydia. The man began howling like an animal as he ejaculated.

Falcon rose arrogantly from the satin-lined casket like some monster from the grave. He stepped onto the floor and wiped his penis with a towel handed him by one of those as lost as he.

Sam put his head on the carpet and wept for the dead young woman he loved.

Roma's laughter reached him. "Oh, don't be such a crybaby, Sam. You may have her now."

Sam lifted his head as Roma raised her hand toward the casket. A quick movement of her fingers and the sounds of weeping came to him.

Sam thought he was going utterly mad as Nydia's eyes opened and she looked around her in confusion. She looked at her nakedness, then at her temporary home, and screaming joined the weeping.

Sam got to his feet and staggered toward the casket as Roma's words reached him.

"Take your darling, Sam. Take her, and witness when the time comes, what marvelous parturient pops from her womb. How does it feel to be beaten, young man?"

Sam ripped drapes from the walls and covered Nydia's nakedness. When he turned to face the witch, she hissed with fright, drawing back from his burning eyes.

Sam said, "We're not beaten, you whore. I'm whipped for now, but I'm not out for the count. But I have realized something from this—ugliness: You can't kill us. God won't let you kill me, and you have to keep Nydia alive. So, yeah, bitch, I'm going to beat you."

Jeering sounds followed his words. A party began as Sam and Nydia walked from the room with as much dignity as they could muster.

Father Le Moyne crossed himself as Nydia finishing her telling of the rape. He visibly paled when she said, "And Sam and I are not certain if Little Sam is our child, or the child of Satan."

"You have no way of knowing?" he asked.

"No," Sam said. "Do you think you can tell?"

"I—don't know. Perhaps it is not yet time for the true body of the child to surface."

"That's what we think, too," Nydia said.

"But with the sightings of the Beasts," Sam said, "we both feel that time is not far off."

Father Le Moyne walked to his kitchen and poured a tumbler half full of whiskey. He downed it in one gulp. He started to refill the tumbler, then thought better of it and put the cap back on the bottle, screwing it down tight. He put the bottle in a cabinet and shut the door hard.

When the priest turned to walk into the small living room, there seemed to be a fresh new strength to the set of his jaw.

"All right," Le Moyne said. "Let's go see your Devil Beasts. Let's face them."

FIVE

Jon Le Moyne listened to his mother and father leave the house. He had already told them goodbye, see you late Sunday, have a good trip, and all that bullshit. He didn't give a damn whether they had a good trip, a bad trip, or even if he ever saw them again. Fuck you both! he thought bitterly. The vulgarity did not shock the young man any more than his thoughts of their never coming back. A month ago it would have. Now it was just a natural part of him. As much a part of him as the sex magazines he kept hidden in his dresser junk drawer. But the magazines were rapidly becoming inadequate for him; did not give him the kick, the heady erotic feeling they had originally produced a few months back.

Jon wanted to feel real breasts beneath his hands; wanted to touch the flesh of a real female; wanted to feel female hands on his body, touching him, their pretty pouty mouths going oohhh and aahhh at his hot, heavy long erection. And he knew—if and when he got the chance—they would do just that, too, for Jon had studied pictures of other men, and knew he was equipped large in that department. He wasn't as freakishly built as that black guy he'd seen in sex ads; wasn't as hefty as that Texas fellow; but he sure as hell wasn't average, either.

Jon felt a flush spread over his body. His face felt feverish and his hands were trembling. His mind replayed pictures of high eroticism. But he vowed he was not going to masturbate.

He was going to find a woman. Or a girl. Didn't make shit to him. Long as it was female. He was going to experience the sensation of getting some pussy.

"Jon?" a voice called to him in a whisper.

The boy spun around, his face pale, his mouth hanging open in shock and fright.

He knew the house was empty. Supposed to be anyway.

"Who—who are you?" Jon whispered. "*What are you?*"

"A friend."

"*Invisible!*"

"But very real. Talk to me, Jon. Tell me your troubles. I'll listen and give you real answers, real solutions to your problems."

"All right," Jon said, taking the first step into the dark arms. "I want a woman."

"Then you shall have one."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

The room began to fill with a slight odor, not unpleasant.

"I know someone who desires you," the voice said. "She is not fully aware of that desire, but it is there."

"Who desires me?" Jon was becoming more relaxed. Something seemed to be calming him. He didn't know what; he didn't care. He was in such a high emotional state he was ready to accept anything; ready to believe anything... just somebody, anybody, do something to relieve the high sexual frustrations that had reached the boiling point within him.

And that somebody had arrived. Had waited for just this moment in the young man's life. That somebody would not fail this time.

"You have prayed for help, have you not, Jon?"

"For all the goddamned good it did me, yes."

"I see. Well, *I* keep my promises. You shall see this afternoon."

"Who desires me?" Jon pushed for an answer.

"Patsy Catlett," the voice whispered.

"Patsy? Nobody gets to Patsy. She's untouchable. Not even the school jocks can get to her. She's a religious freak. Like I used to be before I wised up."

"You have—ah—wised up?"

"Oh, yeah. Believe it. I've rejected quite a lot of that shit I was taught about God."

"I'm glad to hear that, Jon. You know, quite a number of the young people here in this community have done the same."

"Yeah? Well, that's good. It was gettin' kind of boring around here."

"But I need your help with Patsy."

"You got it."

"No—" the voice laughed obscenely, "*you'll* get it. The way is open. Patsy is waiting for you. She will be at the spot where she always goes on Saturday afternoons, when the weather is nice. Do you know the place?"

"No."

"By the banks of the St. Regis," the voice whispered. A strange

giggle reached Jon's ears. "She'll be reading her Bible."

"She'll be reading her Bible and waiting for me to fuck her?"

"That is correct, Jon. Now, Jon—want to do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Take your Bible and tear it apart; throw it on the floor."

Without hesitation, the boy did as ordered. It seemed funny. He kicked at the pages, scattering them. The urge to shit came over him.

"You know what to use to wipe yourself, Jon," the voice came to him.

The boy picked up the pages and went into the bathroom.

Will Gibson tied the rope around his waist and with a small smile of farewell to Chief Draper and Joe Bennett, descended into the dark stinking hole in the earth. He was out of sight in two seconds.

Joe said, "I got a bad feeling about this, Chief."

"So do I, Joe. Too many strange—" there was that word again—"things occurring. Marie Fowler's body disappears. The paramedics are found dead. Don't know what killed them. Judith Mayberry falls or was pushed into this hole, and the people of this town are behaving—at least to my way of thinking—damn weird."

Will keyed the small radio attached to his belt. "More rope," he said. The signal was strong.

Will crawled on through the darkness, the gloom penetrated only by the single light on his hard hat. The smell was awful, and getting worse. Will thought he heard something just up ahead. He stopped. Using the flashlight from his small backpack, he cast the hard beam forward. He could see nothing. He crawled on. There it came again; that sound. Like an animal's growl.

He slipped forward cautiously, just the first twinge of fear touching his belly, like a snake's crawling on his bare skin. God! That smell! He lifted the yellow/white beam of light. Will scampered backward as wild, red eyes were caught in the single beam of light. He scraped his knees on sharp rocks. Something grabbed at his arm, missed, then clamped down hard on his wrist. He was jerked forward. Terror gripped him with numbing force, paralyzing his vocal cords. He could only make tiny grunting sounds. The flashlight fell from his hand, shattering on the rocky floor. His hard hat was knocked from his head, but the light did not go out. The beam from the hard hat picked up a shard of gold from one of the creatures that held the man pinned to the floor of the tunnel. It was an earring dangling from the lobe of one now pointy ear. It matched the earring Chief Draper had found. It belonged to Judith. The Beast looked long at Will Gibson. Recognition flared in the wild eyes.

My God! Will thought. That's *Judith!*"

The beast with the single earring leaned forward, her breath stinking on Will's face. The foulness made Will gag, vomit pushing up to his throat.

"No!" a voice spoke from the blackness. "I must do that."

While clawed hands held Will numbed and frightened to the floor, the rope was removed from his waist. He was dragged into a large underground room. A human form knelt down and sank her teeth into Will's neck. Pain lanced through his body as blood was sucked from him. A darkness crept upward in the man's body, beginning in his feet and moving slowly, coldly, throughout his entire body. Will Gibson sank into unconsciousness.

"Release him near the opening when the men have gone," the woman said. And the Beasts trembled with fear.

On the surface, Joe gently tugged on the rope. He looked at Monty. "We lost him, Chief."

Monty spoke again and again into the radio. Only silence returned to the men.

The men waited for half an hour. Joe said, "We lost him, Chief."

"But to what?" Monty looked at him.

One more time Monty knelt down and shouted into the hole. "Will! Will Gibson! Answer me."

Only the awful stench and the darkness greeted Monty's words.

"Shit!" Monty said. He turned around. Every window facing the orchard was filled with a grim-looking face, unblinking eyes staring at the two men.

"Crazy," Monty muttered. "It's just—crazy!"

Joe started to pull the rope topside. Monty stopped him. "Leave it, Joe. Maybe Will is all right and he'll find the rope. That'll help guide him back up."

"He ain't comin' back up, Chief." There was a dead quality to Joe's remark.

Monty looked at the man. "Say what's on your mind, Joe."

"I always thought it kinda foolish, Chief."

"I thought flying saucers were foolish until I saw one one night."

"You saw a UFO?"

"I saw something I couldn't explain. Yeah. So tell me what's on your mind."

"Let's get out of this orchard and away from them goddamn starin' eyes."

"They make me uncomfortable, too," Monty admitted. "What in the hell is going on with this town?"

"Evil," Joe said. "Pure evil."

"There is a perfectly logical explanation for all this," Monty said. But he could feel ... something crawling around him; an invisible ... he

didn't know what. Couldn't put it into words. But he was glad to be leaving the orchard. And from that stinking hole that was claiming lives.

But what was claiming them? Not just the hole. It was something in the hole. But what? And what in the hell was the matter with the people of the town? They seemed to have turned into a bunch of liars, zombies, and unwashed. Strange. Crap! That word again.

"I never liked people starin' at me," Joe said, as the men got in the prowl car and pulled out.

"I know the feeling."

"You going to report this to Sheriff Jenkins, Chief?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Joe. Not yet. Tell me what's on your mind."

"There have been sightings, from time to time, of— well, monsters in this area—"

Monty sighed. "Joe—"

"No, let me finish, Chief. I moved here with my folks in '43. I was just a kid. I told you that. I was a man grown 'fore I ever heard the stories 'bout the Giddon House and Fox Estate. You know what a coven is, Chief?"

"A Devil's coven?"

"That's the one. Norman Giddon's great-grandfather was supposed to have made a deal with the Devil. In return for riches, the Giddon children were all to be handed over to the Devil. You ever been inside the Giddon place, Chief?"

"No."

"Neither have I. Rumor has it the place is filled with—well, Satan stuff. Pictures of orgies and sacrifices and crap like that. And most of the sightings of monsters have been around his estate, Fox Estate, and lands he owns out in the country. Several sightings have been reported from near the old orchard, out next to the Balon house."

That got Monty's attention. "What? Whose house?"

"That young couple goes to college over at Nelson. The Balon couple."

"Before I make up my mind on what to do about Will Gibson—for some reason I'm even leary of calling this in—let's take a run over to the Balon house."

"You're driving."

Will Gibson crawled from the hole in the orchard. He looked the same as when he entered, with the exception of muddy clothing. He rubbed his hand on his neck. His neck hurt. There were two tiny puncture wounds on the side of his neck. And his head felt ... odd. And he found his walk peculiar; more a lurch than a step.

He stopped and looked back toward the hole. Very well, he had found Judith and she was content. So be it. Now Will had things of his own to take care of, matters to attend to. The voices in his head told him that. He shielded his eyes from the sunlight as he lurched from the orchard. He remembered he had left sunglasses in Judith's bedroom. He entered the house, found his dark glasses, and put them on. He felt better then. He smiled and looked at his image in a mirror. His tongue and teeth felt strange. His tongue was swollen and bright red; his cuspids had grown pointed, into fangs. Everything was normal.

He willed his teeth to return to normal shape and size and watched as they did so. Fascinating.

His lurch was beginning to resemble a normal step as he walked to his car. But somehow he knew he would always walk rather oddly. No matter. He could hardly wait for darkness. There was something important he had to do and do it only by night. He didn't know what. Not yet. But he knew it would come to him.

Jon did not want to startle the lovely young woman sitting by the river, reading, so he deliberately back-tracked several hundred yards and then returned, whistling as he walked.

Patsy looked up from her Bible. She smiled as she recognized Jon. Jon was a nice Christian boy—even if he was Catholic. Jon didn't try to hit on her all the time like most of the other boys.

Patsy was a petite brunette with an hourglass figure. And she was a Christian girl without being overbearing and/or obnoxious about it. Patsy did not preach to others about her feelings toward Christ. She just went her own way, within her own small circle of friends—but lately that circle had grown much smaller, and she couldn't understand why—and carefully avoided those whom she felt were not subscribers of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Jon smiled at her. "Hi, Patsy. If I'm disturbing you, I'll leave." The hell I will.

"Not at all, Jon. I'm glad to see you. Would you like to sit down?" She patted the ground beside him.

I'd like to play with your titties. "Sure." Jon sat beside her just as that heady hot feeling he had experienced back in his room once more swept over him. He looked at her Bible and felt a feeling of revulsion looking at it. How could anyone read that shit? What a fool he had been all those past years.

She closed her Bible and laid it aside. "It's so beautiful this time of the year. This is my very favorite season."

"Mine, too," Jon lied. He didn't have a favorite season. He just wanted some pussy.

Three months before, that word could not be found in his thoughts, much less in his vocabulary. Now it seemed a natural part of him.

She studied his face. "Is something troubling you, Jon? Would you like to discuss it with me?"

I'm going to discuss it with you. I'm going to stick some meat to you. "I know why you're here," he blurted.

"Oh?" She smiled at him.

"Yeah. So what are we waiting for?"

"Jon—are you all right?"

I'll be fine in about two minutes. "Look, Patsy, let's just get comfortable and get down to business."

"What?"

He reached for her, grabbing her roughly, one hand fumbling at her breasts. She fought away his hands and slapped him across the face.

Jon returned the slap, only much harder. The force of his blow stunned her. She fell limply into his arms.

"I knew you were just playacting," Jon said. His eyes were wild and hot with lust.

He tore her jacket from her and jerked off her shirt. He licked his lips at the sight of bare female flesh. She regained her senses and tried to fight him, but her struggles seemed only to give him more strength. He savagely tore her bra from her. The sight of her bare breasts was almost more than Jon could cope with. His growing erection was painful confined within his jeans.

He confused her by saying, "Stop pretending with me, Patsy!"

"Jon! Don't do this to me!" She fought his hands and again slapped him.

He hit her twice, rocking her head, addling her, her long hair whipping around her heart-shaped face. She felt the coldness of earth on her bare back.

Jon removed his leather belt and secured her wrists, binding them tightly. He tied the other end around a small sapling. "I've read about girls like you," he panted the words, lust making the words almost incomprehensible to her. "You bitches like it rough. Bondage. That's the word. That's the way you like it, huh—O.K., then that's the way it's gonna be."

She finally opened her mouth to scream and Jon slapped a hand over her lips and painfully wound the fingers of his other hand in her hair. His mouth close to her face, his breath hot on her cheek, he said, "If you want to live, don't scream. I don't know why you're doing this; don't know why you pretend you don't want to fuck me, but if you scream, I'll kill you. Do you understand that?"

Her eyes wide and frightened, she nodded her head.

Jon removed his hand from her mouth. "If you scream, Patsy, I'll

make the hurt last a long time before you die. You'd better understand that."

"I believe you," she said softly.

He bent his head and sucked at her breasts and nipples while he worked off his jeans and underwear. He seemed oblivious to the cool air from the river. She felt his erection flop hot and heavy on her leg. She offered no resistance as he quickly undressed her and parted her legs. He tried to force his length inside her, but he was large and she was dry. He worked a finger inside her, then two. Finally moisture began to dampen her virgin tightness.

He tried again to force the head of his penis inside her. But he was so large and swollen all he accomplished was pain for both of them.

"Goddamn you!" he swore at her.

"It isn't my fault!" she returned the shout.

He slapped her. "I told you not to yell!" he hissed at the girl.

She turned her face away and wept. Her wrists ached from the leather bindings and her genital area hurt from Jon's attempted rape.

She opened her eyes and looked at his swollen maleness. The ... thing seemed abnormal to her. It was. She pulled her eyes to his face. She could see evil written plainly there. "The Lord is my shepherd," she began praying. "I shall not—"

Jon slapped her. "Oh, shut up with that crap. You don't believe that shit any more than I do."

"I do!" she cried.

Black evil colored the boy's eyes. "Tell me you don't," he urged her. "Say it and it'll be easier for you."

"You won't hurt me?"

"I'll try to be easy with you. Come on, Patsy, say it. Say it." He slapped her again and again, bruising her face.

She spoke the damning words, over and over until he stopped slapping her. She repeated them.

A hot wind began blowing over youthful flesh. Something clouded Patsy's mind. The words came easier to her, and for the first time in her young life, she truly blasphemed.

Jon lay between her legs and began licking at her. Patsy tried to feel shame and revulsion at the oral act but found she could not. She felt his tongue enter her and she twisted and moaned. She was not aware of the hot wind matching her moaning and thrashing. She became wet and wanting. Jon worked fingers inside her, spreading her. He removed the leather belt.

He positioned himself and pushed. It hurt her, but still she felt something else over the pain. She laughed hoarsely and kissed him as his manhood tore through maidenhead.

Both of the young people were so involved in the heat of the act

they did not notice the dark laughter rising from the river like an invisible mist.

"Oh, goddamn, that feels good!" Jon whispered.

She pulled his mouth to hers and rammed her tongue between his lips.

As he drove deeper with each thrust, filth began rolling from the mouths of the young couple in dark rivers of blasphemy. They were unaware of the black mist that covered them and the area in which they rolled and hunched and lunged at each other. The girl experienced shattering climax after building climax, finally shivering as the young man filled her with hot fluid.

They lay on the piles of clothing. "We'll rest for a time," he told her. "Then we'll do it again."

"Fucking right," Patsy said.

"Logandale one," the call came through.

"Go ahead," Monty replied.

"How'd the search go, Chief?"

"We—" Monty hesitated. "We didn't find a thing."

"I just wondered. I just seen Will Gibson getting out of his car at the hardware and he looked kind of grim. Clothes all muddy. Walked kind of funny, too. O.K., Chief, ten-fifty and out."

Joe sighed and Monty was speechless.

The cops pulled into the drive at the Balon house, parking behind Father Le Moyne's car.

"Uh-huh," Joe said.

"What does that mean, Joe?"

"Means the shit is about to hit the fan. Look over there." He pointed to the old orchard.

Sam, Nydia, and Father Le Moyne were standing in the center of the old orchard, the three of them looking at the cop car. Nydia held Little Sam in her arms.

The men got out and Monty called, "Hold up, folks." The cops walked briskly across the now rocky field.

Monty spoke to all and Sam said, "What's up, Chief?"

For the first time, Monty noticed the big .41 mag belted at Sam's waist. "You got a permit for that hand cannon, Sam?"

"It's registered," Sam told him.

"That's not what I asked, but I'll let it slide for now. But I am curious why you think you have reason for wearing a gun."

Monty felt Nydia's dark gypsy eyes searching his face. He felt she was picking his mind and was uncomfortable under her silent scrutiny. He could not hide his shock when she said, "He knows, Sam. Or suspects. And something awful other than Marie has happened.

That's why they are here."

Joe grunted and visibly paled. The pull of the superstitious mountains was still strong within him, not fading with the passage of time.

"I was not aware you could read minds, Mrs. Balon," Monty said, with a touch of irritation.

"It's something I picked up from my mother's side of the family," she told him.

"Your mother must have been a very interesting woman," Monty spoke dryly.

Nydia smiled. "She was a witch. She was the daughter of Satan."

"Bitch, 'itch" Little Sam said.

Father Le Moyne crossed himself. Joe muttered a softly spoken prayer. Monty experienced a giddy feeling sweep over him, muddling his thoughts.

"It's all true," Father Le Moyne said. "Chief, Joe, there are many of them in this community, and very few of us. I suggest we go to the house and talk."

"Them?" Monty questioned.

"Satan worshippers," Le Moyne told him.

"I told my daddy we ought not to leave Kentucky," Joe said, a mournful expression on his face.

Monty experienced cold fear as Sam suddenly jerked the .41 from leather, pointed the muzzle in Monty's direction, and jacked back the hammer.

"No!" Monty screamed.

SIX

Jon did not remember loosening the belt from Patsy's wrists, but the leather was gone, tossed to one side. She sat with her jacket around her bare shoulders. The young man seemed impervious to the cool late fall air. He sat naked on his jeans.

Patsy had become somewhat lucid, and could not believe the things she had done and had allowed to be done to her. "When are you going to let me go home?" she asked.

"As soon as we fuck again."

"I'm sore. You hurt me." She was careful not to mention anything about going to the police, but she was thinking it.

"You'll enjoy it more the second time. And put all thoughts of the police out of your mind."

"How did you know I was thinking of the police?"

His grin was pure black evil. "I know many things I didn't used to know. I'll teach them to you. For I know you want to learn."

"How do you know that?" A faint odor came to her, a rather pleasant odor. She inhaled it and it seemed to calm her mind.

"You cummed when I ate you."

Her blush covered her from nose to toes. But she laughed, that odor affecting her perspective. "I guess you're right. But what makes you think I won't go to the police?"

"Because it's too late for that. I just know. It's all been arranged by forces much more powerful than mere mortals." He did not know how he knew that; he just did. "I have accepted another—plan," he struggled for the word. "And so will you. I think the police are on our side."

"Our side?"

"Yours and mine. Yes. It's so easy and simple once you relax your guard." He stretched out beside her. His flaccid penis large even in softness. "And why not?" he questioned her. "There is nothing wrong in feeling good."

"The Bible says what we—you did—is wrong."

The mist once more drifted over the couple.

"Oh, shit, Patsy! Don't be so stupid. Have you ever in your life experienced anything like when you cummed today?"

The mist touched her. "No," she said.

Jon continued speaking. As he talked, a strange feeling began sweeping over the girl; an alien sensation never before experienced. It was as if she was being transformed from one person to another; her old self being stripped from her just as a snake sheds its skin. All her teachings, all those things once so good and dear to her were being tossed aside.

Patsy was unaware that dark forces were hovering nearby, working their ageless magic on her. And somewhere, squatting near black-tinted flames, the Master of all that is evil howled in triumph, pointing his face Heavenward, screaming oaths toward his enemy.

Patsy's eyes changed as she lost both faith and innocence. Clouds of darkness swept over the sixteen-year-old. She reached out and laid her hand on Jon's penis, her fingers gently caressing the softness. She felt him stir at her touch, the blood coursing through him, thickening him, lengthening him. She felt power beneath her fingertips. She stroked him into hardness. She leaned forward and took him. The Dark One howled. She was his.

The report of the .41 mag was shockingly loud in the early afternoon. A scream of pain from behind the small group spun the chief around. He could not believe what ran limping away, to disappear into the ground.

Little Sam had covered his ears. Now he was tuning up to cry. Nydia

comforted him.

The ... whatever in the hell it was was the most hideous thing Monty had ever seen. "What in the name of God was that!"

"A Beast," Nydia said, holding Little Sam tightly. "One of Satan's creatures. They live underground; they're probably all over this area. They live in groups, only coming out at Satan's request. It must be getting close to the Black Mass for them to surface."

"The Black Mass?" Joe managed to croak.

"It's a Saturday," Nydia explained. "The High Black Mass could be held tonight. Some covens differ from others in their choosing of a night of the week in which to call upon the forces of darkness."

Joe stood with his mouth hanging open, staring at the beautiful young woman. Monty thought perhaps all this was a dream, and he would soon wake up. He hoped to God it was all a dream. Monty pointed to where the Beast had dropped into the ground.

"Where did that thing come from?" he asked Sam.

"From its lair in the ground. I've been watching it for about a minute, circling around, coming up behind you. It probably was a young Beast. From what I know about them, the older ones would never take such a chance, for as you see, they can be hurt and killed."

"*Well, you're goddamn calm about all this!*" Monty screamed.

Sam shrugged his shoulders. "I know what we face, and I know what I have to do."

"Who are we facin' and what is it you got to do?" Joe asked, his face ashen.

"We face Satan and his worshippers. And I have to fight them. It's just that simple."

"There ain't nothing simple 'bout all this!" Joe almost shouted the words. "Man—tell me this is some kind of joke. *Please* tell me this is a joke!"

"It is no joke," Father Le Moyne said, and his words chilled Joe Bennett.

Monty seemed to come out of his trance. He looked nervously around him, as if expecting some other type of monster to come leaping at him from out of the ground. He snapped his fingers. "Whitfield, Nebraska. You were born in Whitfield. That's the town that was destroyed back in 1958. A few survivors were left, and they rebuilt the town. Then about three years ago, a giant meteor struck there, killing everybody and completely wiping out the town and the land around it for several miles."

"It was the hand of God," Sam corrected the man.

"Lordy, Lordy, Lordy!" Joe said. He looked upward, as if expecting to see a mighty fist forming.

"The Devil's agent in Whitfield, back in 1958, was a man named

Black Wilder. My father killed him. Not as you know death, but he sent him from earth. My father agreed to fight Nydia, the witch. He both won and lost."

"Lordy, Lordy!" Joe said.

"And Nydia is your *mother*?" Monty looked at Nydia.

"No," she lied. "My mother's name was Roma. But she was also a witch." She was not about to tell these people anymore about her links with Sam.

The odor of the Beasts was strong in the old orchard. Father Le Moyne grimaced his disgust. "Let us please retire to the house. I don't want you people to think me cowardly, but that smell is making me physically ill."

"You just ain't whistlin' Dixie 'bout that," Joe said.

"I hit it hard," Sam said. "It will probably die. Its own kind will eat it."

Joe's stomach rumbled at the thought. "Monty," he said clutching at the Chiefs arm. "We gotta call the state police or the National Guard, or—hell, somebody.

"It's too late for that," Nydia said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Everything has been set in motion. Satan will allow no interference from this point forward. Not until the game has reached its conclusion."

"Game!" Monty shouted. "This is a *game*?"

"I'm afraid it is," Father Le Moyne spoke. "Although some of my colleagues would argue that. It is a game that is as old as time and earth itself; perhaps as old as the worlds we know exist in the galaxies, and those we can only speculate about."

"Lordy, Lordy," Joe said. "I gotta go to the bathroom."

Late afternoon in Upstate New York. Already the shadows were darkening pockets of landscape, creating gloom. Street lamps were coming on, and motorists were turning on headlights.

The chief medical examiner of McGray County was surprised to see his assistant enter the room. "I thought you were going home, Max."

"Changed my mind," the young assistant replied.

"My wife is out of town and I thought I'd try to catch up on the backlog of work we have piled up."

"Ah, youth," the M.E. said, leaning back in his chair. "I keep forgetting how it is to be young."

"Fannntastic!" Max grinned.

The M.E. laughed. "I said young, Max, not over the hill." He stood up, found his topcoat, and shrugged his way in it. "Ridiculous to be working on Saturday. I'm going home."

"See you Monday, John," Max said.

The door hissed. The room was silent, sterile. Max worked at paperwork for a time, but found his mind kept wandering back to the paramedics. Something very odd about them. Very strange. He could not concentrate for thinking about them. So pale and seemingly bloodless. Max finally tossed his ballpoint to the desk in frustration and walked into the cooler room.

Max looked at the vaults containing the backlog of cadavers and then walked to the center vault, pulling it open. He pulled out the sliding tray and stood looking for a moment at the sheet-covered paramedic. Max flipped back the sheet. He leaned closer to get a better look at the marks on the man's neck. Max remained in position, in numb shock, as the man's eyes opened. Hands suddenly grabbed the young doctor's neck and face, pulling him forward. Max struggled for footing on the tile floor, his leather-soled shoes slipping. He could not yell, for his mouth was held tightly together by hands that seemed to possess superhuman strength. Max felt the hands that gripped him pulling his face closer, closer. The paramedic's breath stank of the dead, the breath putrid and evil-smelling.

Max cut frantic eyes downward. He could see the red gaping mouth of the dead man, opening and closing as if in anticipation of the bloodless lips touching living flesh.

Max tried to scream as the hps pulled back, exposing fangs where there were once normal teeth. The undead pulled the living closer, then lunged upward, his mouth closing on Max's neck, fangs sinking into the young M.E.'s neck. He drank and sucked greedily, while Max slowly felt life—as he knew life—leave him. His heart began to strain and convulse in his chest as life-sustaining blood was pulled from him.

The paramedic staggered from the coolness of the mat and allowed Max to slump, still alive, to the tile floor. He opened the cooler containing the body of his friend. The dead man opened his eyes and smiled, looking up into the pale face of living death. He was helped from the mat and the two men lurched toward Max. There, the second paramedic drank thirstily, draining the blood from the young M.E.

Both men smacked their lips and grinned grotesquely at each other.

The paramedic named Dan Golden pointed to the dead—more or less—young doctor. "Can't leave him here." His words were pushed from his mouth, slurred while moving around the swollen tongue.

"I know," his friend, Jerry replied.

Their voices were hollow-sounding, and their breath left the odor of decaying flesh hanging in the sterile room.

The men then spoke silently to one another, the thoughts of the dead yet living transmitted from out of dead brains. They began searching for clothing. They found surgical jackets and pants in a closet and hurriedly dressed. They placed the young M.E. on a rolling

gurney and covered him with a blanket. They would get out of the hospital proper first, worry about transportation when that was accomplished. A sense of homing told them they must return to Clark County. To Logandale. To the Master.

No one stopped them in the busy hospital. The shift that had seen the dead men come in had already gone home. The new ground floor shift were busy, and gave the pale-looking men pushing the gurney only a brief glance.

The paramedics found an ambulance with the keys in it, loaded the young M.E. into the back, and drove off. Toward Logandale. Home. To the Master.

Fully dressed, if a bit rumpled, Jon and Patsy walked slowly out of the woods by the river. Patsy had responded even more the second time, with Jon's being much more gentle with her. She had bitten her lips as one shivering climax followed on the heels of another. She could not understand the strange new feelings within her. But she found she did not possess either the will or the strength to fight them.

"I'll pick you up at your house at seven," Jon told her. "We'll go to my house where we can be alone."

"All right, Jon," Patsy said. Whatever the boy ordered her to do, she felt compelled to obey.

"You will not go to your house," a voice spoke to Jon. He knew who it was; all the pieces were falling into place. Everything that had happened to him over the past few months now added up. Jon was a very intelligent young man, and he had silently suspected something of this nature all along. He didn't care.

"You and your recently deflowered young lady friend will come to the Giddon house. You will be there at nine o'clock. Do not be early, do not be late."

"As you command," Jon replied. He glanced at Patsy. She was hearing none of the conversation.

"You do not seem to be overly concerned about silent messages, young man."

"I'm not. I don't care."

"Very good. I think you shall find the events of this evening most interesting and pleasant. We will have a task for you later on."

"Tonight?"

"That, too. But that is not the task I speak of."

"Then what?"

"The young woman of your dreams. The one occupying your mind while you practiced self-abuse in the darkness of your bedroom."

Tired as he was, Jon's heart quickened at the thought. "Nydia?"

"None other."

"Will you answer a question for me?"

"Possibly."

"Are you Satan?"

"Possibly. The Master is always close—one form or another—to those who choose to serve him."

"The *Master!*"

"Of course, young man. *I* am now your Master. We made a deal. You said you would return a favor for a favor. My side of the bargain has been—" The voice giggled. "—Consummated. Now it is your turn."

Jon did not give it much thought. He didn't care. "All right," he said.

"Ta-ta, Jon," the voice cheerfully replied, then faded away.

"If you know so much," a badly shaken Chief Draper spoke to Nydia. "If you can read minds and—whatever else it is you do, how come you didn't see all this— whatever is happening—and warn people about it?"

"Because I was blocked out. Because Satan knows I renounced his dark faith and became a Christian. Satan rules the earth, Chief, God the Heavens. But my mother was, remember, a witch, and some of her powers did show up in me."

"Lordy," Joe said.

Monty shook his head in confusion and disbelief.

Sam answered the knock on the front door. Janet stepped in, smiling as usual. "I'm a little early," she said. "But I knew you wouldn't mind." She spoke politely to Father Le Moyne, Chief Draper, and Joe. "Is something the matter?" She looked at Sam.

"Nothing we can't handle, Janet," Sam said, returning the smile.

All could see the afternoon had melted into dusk, with the sky overcast, already dripping moisture and sculpturing hollow pockets of gloom around the land.

"Do you want me to leave, Sam? I get the feeling I'm interrupting some grown-up talk."

"No, you stay, Janet. Nydia and I won't be going to the movies this evening." He glanced at Monty. "We usually drive over to Blaine for dinner and a movie on Saturday evenings," he explained. He swung his eyes to Janet. "But there is some community business we're— involved in. And we might be late. Your parents won't object if you stay over?"

"Oh, no. I'll just call and tell them." She hefted a large purse. "You know I always bring a change with me, just in case you want me to spend the night."

Her eyes were bright and clear and full of innocence, despite the rape she had endured as a child kidnapped and brought to Falcon House in Canada. The teenager had been rescued by Sam and returned to her parents. Rescued, so Sam and Nydia were led to believe. Janet

had been Little Sam's babysitter since his moment of birth.

Janet had plans for Little Sam.

Monty, Joe, and Father Le Moyne rose as if on silent cue. Monty said, "Well—Sam, Nydia, we'll see the both of you at the house in about an hour. We'll continue this—discussion there. You'll stay for dinner, of course." The men moved toward the door and the approaching night.

Outside, the door closed behind them, Joe looked toward the old orchard. "Can you imagine eating on that goddamn thing out there?" He looked at Father Le Moyne. "Cuse me, Father."

"I couldn't have put it more aptly myself," the priest said, taking no offense. "Gentlemen, I have mass to attend to. I'll see you both around eight-thirty." He walked to his car, backed around the police car, and disappeared into the night.

"Monty?" Joe said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm scared and confused."

"Join the club, Joe."

"How come you didn't level with Sheriff Jenkins this morning?"

"I—don't know, Joe." But he did know.

"You think he's one of—*them*?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Yeah," Monty said, his voice containing resignation. "Yeah, I do."

"Me, too. Monty, something just came to me a few minutes ago. We're in a box. There ain't nobody on God's green earth gonna believe any of this even if we was to call for help. Hell! They'd lock us up in the loony bin."

"I know that, too."

"I used to look forward to the night. Meant gettin' off work, goin' home to the wife and dinner. Maybe a few beers and some TV." He looked around him at the wet gathering darkness. "I ain't lookin' forward to this night, Chief."

"Not one word of this, Joe. To anybody. Not a word. We'll firm it all up at my house. Come on. I'll drop you off at your car."

Janet went to Little Sam's room and stood for a moment, watching the child play with his toys.

Are you or aren't you? She silently questioned. Are you one of us, or one of them? Are you a child of my Master, or are you a whimpering Christian? I wish I knew.

The child looked up at her and grinned.

Janet heard the sound of water running in the bathroom. That would be Sam, taking a shower. She stood for a moment, mentally conjuring pictures of him in the shower, naked. Then other pictures of

high sexuality played erotically in her mind. She wanted Sam Balon. Wanted to feel him entering her. She became wet with passion. She fought the pictures away.

Janet again looked at the child. She thought: If it is determined that you are not one of us, but a spawn of them—I am going to kill you.

SEVEN

"Princess," the young woman was addressed. "We have word that the Christians are massing. They are few, yes, but Sam Balon's offspring is among them. As well as the turncoat, Nydia."

The young woman with the long brown hair and pale eyes looked at her servant. She was tall, with a magnificent figure. Very stately and very regal appearing. She was Satan's child. The daughter of the Devil. A demon. She served only the Black Master of evil. Her father: Satan. She had burst forth from her mother's womb in a shower of blood and torn flesh. Roma the witch had died this earthly life giving birth to her. The young woman looked to be about twenty years of age.

By earth time, she was three years old. She had been born on the sixth day of the sixth month, at precisely the sixth minute of Roma's pregnancy. At precisely the exact moment Little Sam was birthed. They were half brother and sister.

But this child was as old as evil—by the hands of the clock that served the Dark One.

"We have the time to delay," the Princess instructed the gathering at Giddon Estate. "As much time as is needed. My father has put us on no firm timetable. But this time you shall not fail him. The Christians are no matter. Masses have been held at this place for over a hundred years. And tonight shall be no different. We shall honor my father—your Master, the King of Darkness—tonight."

"Yes, Princess. As you command." Professor Frank Gilbert bowed and scurried away.

The lovely young woman smiled in the candlelit gloom of the large room. Her teeth were, for a moment, fanged. She allowed herself the heady pleasure of thinking of Sam Balon for a time. Her mother had left her own images in her demon child: the images of the woman Sam Balon, Sr. knew as Nydia; Sam Balon, Jr. knew as Roma. They were one and the same. The Balons, father and son, were lusty men, well-endowed, and the Princess planned to sample the wares of Sam Balon. And while she was sampling, she would gently introduce Sam into the dark pleasures of her Master. One little bite with her very sharp teeth, and the one obstacle toward her Master's ruling this area would be removed. Then they could move on to greater things. The entire state. The United States. The *world!*

"Not too fast, my pretty," the voice came to her. The room began to stink of hell. The candles flickered as if in fear. Rain lashed the mansion.

"Father," the Princess said softly.

"It is one thing to be ambitious, dear. Quite another to be foolishly reckless."

"I did not know—was not aware you were so close."

"Yes. I came because I am quite sure my old adversary will stick His goody-two-shoes nose into this affair and fuck it all up. As He is prone to do."

The Princess giggled.

"It is no laughing matter, my pretty," the heavy voice returned her to sobriety rudely. "Your mother died this earthly life birthing you; a gift to me. And don't think for a moment that meddlesome old fart up in the firmament wasn't plenty pissed off about your mother seducing Sam. He claimed I broke the rules—not so. I just interpreted them differently, that's all. So we are going to slow the timetable, my precious. We are going to take it nice and easy and slow, and we are not going to rock any boats this time. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

"As long as you do. Now I am going to have some more fun. It's been entirely too long since I visited this planet personally. And keep your legs together, you horny bitch. You must save your virginity for Sam Balon. In that respect, you are just too goddamned much like your mother. Oh, what a coup it would be if you could birth Balon's child." The wind picked up as dark laughter howled in the huge room.

When the howling had stopped, the Princess asked, "And how is Mother?"

"Well. Bitchy, as usual. But that is to be expected of her. She is ruling an upper level on another planet."

"Black?"

"Which Black?" the voice sounded testy.

"Wilder."

"Oh. He's doing quite well. He is teaching new recruits. A fine and loyal man. But your idiot half-brother is the most useless, whining, malcontented son-of-a-bitch I have encountered since Nero. And that silly shit still fancies himself a poet and painter."

"My half-brother a poet?"

"Oh, no! Nero!"

The Princess hung her head in penance. "Forgive me, Father."

"Oh, stop groveling and get on with matters. And Princess, don't fail me."

A stinking wind blew through the great house by the river. The candles went out, plunging the room into darkness. The Beasts on the

grounds below the mansion shook with fear.

And far away, in the firmament, a star twinkled a bit more brightly than usual.

"I left my wife out of this," Joe said, after he had been seated in the Draper's den. "She's not well, and I don't believe she could take anything like this. I don't know whether I'm gonna be able to take it."

"She's not recovering from her operation?" Monty asked.

"No. The doctors always say they got it all—but they didn't, and Nellie knows it. She's dying little by little. Sad thing to have to watch."

And the wind that was hovering silently over the Draper house, carrying within it a foul odor, seemed to sigh and say, "Well, now—how interesting."

The dark mass disappeared into the night.

Father Le Moyne shivered suddenly. His skin felt clammy, as if something slimy had touched bare flesh. He drew a nervous breath. "Was I the only one to hear something just then? Outside, I mean."

"I—thought I heard something," Monty said.

His wife put her hand in his. "I heard something too, honey. It sounded like words."

He looked at her pale face. Lifted his eyes to the others. "I told her all I knew. I don't think she believed me."

There was an amused look in the woman's eyes. "I have a birthday next week. My husband knows I like horror books and movies. You people fixed all this up, didn't you? Even got the priest in on it."

Sam looked at the woman. "Viv, we have no reason to lie. None of us. But if we don't panic, I think we can beat this."

Viv laughed. "Oh, you people! Come on. Monty fixed all this up, admit it. You people have someone outside, whispering, don't you?"

"No, Vivian," Father Le Moyne said. "I would have nothing to do with a joke this grotesque. Satan is anything but a joking matter."

Viv shifted her gaze from person to person, touching all eyes, finally settling on Nydia. She saw only seriousness in those dark gypsy eyes. Joe had seemed tense and upset. Father Le Moyne wore lines of fatigue around his eyes. Monty wore a haunted look.

"It isn't a joke," Viv whispered. "You people really believe the Devil is here in Logandale."

"Believe it, Vivian," the priest said. "It is no joke, I assure you of that."

Viv released her husband's hand. She stood up, and Sam could not help viewing her with a man's appreciative eyes. Viv was tall, almost willowy. Sam had heard she had been a fashion model in New York City. He believed it. Her hair was a golden color, her figure slightly fuller than the average model, with none of the gauntness associated

with that profession. She was a woman who could turn men's heads. Sam guessed her age at thirty. She had the trimness and vitality about her of a woman ten years younger.

"I don't believe in the Devil," Viv said.

"I have a feeling," Nydia said, looking at the woman, "that will change during the next few days."

Viv tossed her golden hair. "Bull!" she said.

The phone rang. Monty stilled the jangling. He listened for a few moments, acknowledged the call, and hung up. His face registered his shock and disbelief. "The paramedics who were here this morning, those men who picked up the body of Marie Fowler and who were later found dead," he spoke to Joe. "Their bodies have disappeared from Clark County General. And the assistant M.E. is missing."

"Drop the other shoe, Chief," Joe said.

"After being shown pictures of the two men, a floor nurse claims she saw the men walking out of the hospital, pushing a gurney with a man—or at least a body—on it. She swears it was the two paramedics. Said they lurched rather than walked, and their eyes were odd."

Viv gasped once and fainted. Sam got to her before her head banged against the floor.

Nellie Bennett lay on the couch in the den, her eyes looking at but not registering the scenes on the TV screen. She was thinking about Joe. Ol' hard luck Joe, she thought. Had a bad time with his wives. His first wife ran off and left him, taking the kids. Joe had no idea where she was; hadn't seen her or the kids in twenty years. His second wife drops dead of a heart attack right in front of his eyes, playing bridge, and now I'm dying.

Nellie was much younger than Joe, almost fifteen years younger. And before the ravages of cancer began eating on her, she was a very attractive woman. She knew she was and had to smile despite the pain in her stomach. Joe looked like a mournful old hound dog, but he could somehow attract good-looking women. And for a man in his fifties, Joe could still make the mattress jump when the lights went out.

She felt sorry for Joe. She just hadn't felt like sex in more than a year. She wouldn't have blamed him if he'd bedded down another woman. Not at all.

Having thought that, she could swear she heard a voice say something like, "Ummm."

She looked around her. No, it had been her imagination.

She rose painfully from the couch and took another pain pill. Lately, the pills seemed to lose their effectiveness. She took another pill and returned to the couch. She was asleep in moments.

"Nellie," the voice whispered to her.

She stirred on the couch.

Her nose wrinkled at the sudden and thick smell that seemed to permeate the den. In her sleep, the smell was scented, but the scent only covered the real odor of burning sulphur.

In her drug-induced sleep, she thought she felt a hand lifting her gown. She thought it was Joe and she mumbled irritably. But the hand persisted. She felt its warmth—almost hot—on the bare flesh of her lower belly.

Then the hand withdrew and for the first time in months, she was free of pain.

She stretched until her bones popped and creaked, something she had been unable to do in months because of the pain it caused. It was a luxurious feeling.

"Isn't that nice, Nellie?" the dark-sounding voice entered her head.

"Oh, my, yes," she murmured.

"As compared to this."

Intense pain doubled her up on the couch. The pain was so hot and hard she cried out. It was more pain than she had ever experienced.

As quickly as the nightmarish anguish struck, it stopped, leaving her body. She sighed with relief. Sweat dotted her face and body.

"That's ever so much better, isn't it, darling?" the voice asked.

"Yes," she murmured. The harshness of the agony had dulled the effects of the drugs in her system. She was in a state of semiconsciousness.

"How would you like to live forever, forever free of pain?"

She giggled, enjoying her dream.

"Would you like that, Nellie?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"And you would give anything for that privilege?"

"Yes."

"*Anything*, Nellie?"

"Yes."

"Well," the voice held a smugness. "I think we are going to get along just fine, Nellie. Oh, my, yes."

"I don't like this place, Jon," Patsy said, holding very tightly to his hand. "It's spooky."

The young couple stood several hundred yards from the Giddon mansion, looming dark in the wet night. Not one light shone through the thin drizzle.

"It'll be all right," Jon assured her. But he was not that sure himself.

"Do not be afraid," the mysterious voice once more spoke to him. "I can assure you that soon you will have all that you have dreamed of."

Patsy stood as if in a trance. She was hearing none of the conversation.

"And Patsy?" Jon asked. "What about her?"

"She had her dreams as well, young man. She combated them, but they were there. Soon she will have them fulfilled."

"When do we go in?"

"Now," the voice said, then faded.

"Let's go," Patsy said. "I'm ready."

The heavy iron gates leading to the curving driveway opened as the young couple approached them. Neither Jon nor Patsy questioned how the gates opened, even though no one could be seen nearby. As they walked up the drive, they were conscious of red eyes watching them from the gloom on the wet hedges and shrubbery on both sides of the concrete. They were aware of a foul odor surrounding them, but somehow the odor never left the grounds of the estate. They did not know how that could be, but they did not question it.

They looked back only once, as the massive gates closed behind them. They heard the snick of a lock. It was as if they had entered another world, another time, another land, cut off from the outside. They could not see past the gates.

The huge oak and iron doors to the mansion swung open. Norman Giddon stood smiling at the boy and girl. The man was dressed in black robes.

"Welcome," he said. "Welcome and enter the kingdom of the Prince of Darkness. Welcome and embrace your new life."

Jon and Patsy stepped inside.

The doors closed behind them.

Patsy clutched at his arm.

Jon felt his heart pound with fear at the dark, hooded shapes gathered in the candlelit room.

The dark shapes moved toward the young couple.

"How's your wife?" Sam asked.

"She's awake," Monty replied. "She apologizes for fainting; she really isn't the fainting type. But I think all this finally got to her. Let's get down to it, people. What in the hell are we going to do?"

"Interesting choice of words," Father Le Moyne muttered. "Very apt."

"Let's count down our options," Joe said. "Assuming all this is true, and I guess it is. One: if we call in help—even if we were believed and not put in the cuckoo house—what would these—people do?"

"Sit back and wait," Sam spoke without hesitation. He wondered how he knew that. But he had experienced message after message from higher powers before, and he had learned not to question, just obey.

"Why?" Monty asked.

This time it was Father Le Moyne who replied. "I think what Sam is saying is this: Those who practice the black arts are in no hurry. They can wait us out."

"And bear in mind this is a game to Satan," Nydia said.

"You reckon we could get the Raiders in here to give us a hand?" Joe tried a joke. When the obligatory smiles had faded, Joe said, "Two: Who do we trust?"

"No one," Sam said quickly and firmly. "Both Nydia and myself have had experience with these types of people, and we can tell you to trust no one. Be suspicious of everyone, but don't be overt with your suspicions. Let them think everything is all right. And keep this in mind: We are going to be far outnumbered."

Joe counted it down. "Three: What do we do?"

"I can't speak for anyone else," the priest said. "But I am going to contact all the ministers in this town. I won't mention what we know is happening, but I want to see if they have sensed it, or are a part of it." He crossed himself at the conclusion of that last remark.

Nydia said, "Look for sudden changes in personal appearance, like Joe mentioned, the way many people smell bad now. Many times coven members will forsake cleanliness, for Satan is known as the Prince of Filth, remember. Look for the numbers six-six-six. Look for a cross placed upside down. And few true Satan worshippers can bear to look at a cross. Other than that, there is little more I can tell you. Just be very careful."

"We'll know what to do after they make the first move," Sam said. "We can't do much until we see if this is going to be a war of nerves or of violence."

"A war," Monty said. "It sounds like we're planning a war."

"We are," Father Le Moyne said. "And more than our lives are at stake. We stand a good chance of losing our souls."

EIGHT

Will Gibson stood in the darkness of his hardware store. He was so thirsty he was weak and trembling. He knew he had to appease his new thirst; knew his body would not be satisfied with anything other than the hot salty taste of human blood. But some inner communication with the forces of darkness warned him that he must not kill—not yet. It wasn't time. Will could not explain how he knew that. He just knew.

He watched as that rich bitch Xaviere Flaubert drove past. Looked like she came from the direction of the Giddon house. Will watched her fancy car fade into the misty night.

He stepped out of the darkened store and stood in the stoop, shrouded in night. He heard the tap-tapping of a woman's high-heeled boots coming down the sidewalk. His heart quickened, his pulse hammering in his throat. He stepped out of the shadows just before the woman reached the edge of his storefront showcase window. The woman stopped, jerked with fright, put a hand to her throat, and then grinned when she saw who it was.

"Hi, Mr. Gibson," she said. "You really scared me for a second."

"I'm sorry," Will said, returning the smile. His teeth flashed very white in the gloom of the damp night. "I didn't mean to startle you, Judy."

Judy Parish, oldest daughter of Deputy Vernon Parish, looked up at the man. Her yellow hair caught the mist and bounced back shards of light. Judy had graduated high school that year and now was employed as a cashier in a local supermarket. Lovely young thing, with blue eyes and fair skin. She had that month moved away from her abusive father into a small apartment of her own.

The cold rain suddenly picked up in intensity and Judy ducked into the stoop, standing close to the man.

"You can't walk all the way to your apartment in this weather," Will said. "It's turning colder and you'll catch your death. Let me give you a lift."

She hesitated, looking at the man. Then she made her decision. Will Gibson was known as a good church-going man. A member of the Logandale Baptist Church. Sang in the choir. It was rumored that he and Miss Judith Mayberry were to be married. So it would be safe to accept a ride from Mr. Gibson.

"I hate to be a bother, Mr. Gibson."

"No bother," he said, trying to keep the impatience from his voice. He took her arm. Felt nice under his hand. "Come on. The car is unlocked." Typical small town.

They pulled away into the downpour. No one saw her leave with the man.

"I'm sorry about Miss Mayberry," Judy said. "I just heard about it this afternoon. Have you any word on what might have happened to her?"

Will had to fight to keep from laughing at the absurdity of her question. The near hysteria of the question and its truthful answer struck him hard. He controlled his black mirth before opening his mouth.

"No word, Judy." Never will be any further word from her mouth. Hairy bitch just squats and grunts, now.

"She'll turn up," Judy replied, with the eternal optimism of the young. "I bet she's all right."

He turned on the road leading out of town and Judy glanced sharply at him.

"This isn't the way to my apartment, Mr. Gibson."

"I know."

"Then—" She let the question dangle in the closed air of the car. It was then she noticed Mr. Gibson sure needed a bath. He smelled bad.

Will looked at her and smiled. In the dim light from the dash, she saw his teeth. His blood red swollen tongue. She noticed his very pale lips.

She felt panic rise up strong within her as he reached for her arm. She tried to pull away, but his grip was as powerful as a man three times his size.

"Please, Mr. Gibson!"

"We're going to have some fun," he told her. "Just the two of us."

"I want to go home!"

He clamped down with his new strength, bruising her flesh. She screamed in pain.

"Please take me home!"

"No more talk of home, girl. You just sit quietly and don't start any trouble. I'm not going to hurt you." Not much, that is, he thought.

She opened her mouth to protest and he slapped her, bloodying her lips. The sight of her blood filled him with the strange new hunger. Glancing in the mirror, he saw the road was clear behind him. He pulled over and turned down a seldom used country road, then turned off that onto an old logging road, now grown over with brush.

Judy began crying and begging.

Will cut the engine and turned off the lights. He pulled the frightened crying girl to him. To her disgust and horror, he began licking the blood from her lips while his free hand roamed her body. His breath was foul-smelling, sickening her almost as much as his tongue licking at her lips and face.

She began screaming and fighting him as he ripped the clothes from her. The rain grew heavy, drumming on the roof of the car parked in the woods. Her screaming could not be heard more than twenty yards away.

She fought him harder, but it was a useless gesture, for his strength came from the supernatural. He hit her with his fist and banged her head against the door, stunning her. When she came to her senses, rising out of a red painful mist, she was naked and Will was positioned between her legs. She could feel his throbbing hardness pushing at her.

She screamed as he took her, penetrating her with one hard shove.

She could not understand why he was biting her on the neck.

Jon and Patsy stood away from the circle of men and women in the

huge room. After recovering from their initial fright at seeing black-robed men and women and a dark-haired woman, lying naked on a black-draped altar, the strange sights and sounds and smells began to intrigue the young couple. Norman Giddon had apologized for thrusting them too quickly into the scheme of things that evening. Said he could understand their fright. He had escorted them into a smaller room and given them refreshments. The drinks were very cold and very sweet. One seemed to call for another, and then another of the cold sweet beverage. Soon fear of the unknown had vanished as the drugged drinks began soaring through the systems of Jon and Patsy.

Norman Giddon stroked the arm of Patsy and said, "My, you certainly did enjoy your initiation into sex this afternoon, didn't you, my dear?"

She looked at the middle-aged man. The drinks had loosened her tongue as well as her inhibitions. "Yeah, once he got it in it felt good."

"I suppose it was a bit on the rough side, dear, but you have laid in your bed many nights and—how do I say this?" He giggled. "Let your fingers do the walking, so to speak. Correct, my child?"

She did not blush. Those days were past and would not return. Not only for Patsy, but for the majority of the residents of Logandale. "How do you know these things, Mr. Giddon?"

"That is something that will be explained in time, my dear. For now, just be content that you are one of us."

Good attempted to override its counterpart. "I am a Christian, Mr. Giddon."

"No, you are not, dear." He met her gaze. "You have mouthed the words since childhood, but your inner thoughts have betrayed your true feelings many times. You see, dear, my, or I should say, *our* God," he waved his hand toward the gathering of the coven, "finds none of what you have thought offensive. Our Master encourages the hedonistic life rather than discouraging it. While you did not realize it, for the past several months, you have been ever so slowly but surely edging toward us, and away from the God you profess to worship."

Patsy drank another cup of the sweet drink and thought about his remarks. She realized he was telling the truth, although he was twisting the words all out of context. "Perhaps you're right," she said. She looked at the altar. "Is that woman dead, or what?"

Norman smiled. "She is very much alive. And she is there of her own volition."

"Why?"

"She is a part (of the proceeding this evening. You shall see."

Patsy nodded her head in agreement. "All right. It won't hurt to stay here for a little while, I guess. Just to see what's going on. I can

always leave whenever I choose."

The black-robed man smiled again. The battle was won, and he knew it.

"Will you tell me the truth if I ask you something, Mr. Giddon?"

"Call me Norman. Certainly, my dear. We have nothing to hide."

"You worship Satan?"

"Yes, we do, dear."

"And you really believe in what you're doing? I mean, this is not just a game to you people?"

"My dear, it is not a game to us. I can be quite adamant on that."

"And if I stay for a time, find I don't like it here—I can leave? Your people won't try to stop me?"

"You may leave anytime you wish, darling."

"All right," she said. She drank the rest of her cup of sweet juice. She looked at the cup. It had been refilled—somehow. "I'll stay for a little while. Then I really must be getting back home."

"Of course, you do. Well, you just wander about a bit; get acquainted. As you can see, there are many more like you and Jon here this evening. Many of your own age group. Socialize—just think of this as a club meeting." He licked his lips at the sight of her young breasts, pushing against the fabric of the blouse. Soon, dear, he thought. Very soon.

At Balon's house, Janet had put Little Sam to bed an hour before and had busied herself preparing a potion and a lust perfume. The potion would be given to Nydia; Janet would wear the perfume. The potion would not kill Nydia—under the rules of the game she could not be killed—but it would knock her out for a time. Long enough for Janet to carry through her plan. The potion would kill a pure mortal, but Nydia was half witch—even if she did reject that side of her—and the dark side of her would throw off the deadly effects.

For her heady perfume, Janet mixed carefully measured portions of lavender, aloeswood, jasmine. She added patchouli oil and allowed that to rest for a few moments. Then she added musk, civet, ambergris, and clove.

She found Sam's hairbrush and carefully removed a few of his hairs. She cut them into tiny pieces and mixed them into the perfume, along with a strand of her own hair.

She added three drops of her own blood.

She recited the Devil's chant as she waited for the perfume to ferment.

*I come from the place of my Master,
The Prince Of Darkness.
He lives in the northernmost corner*

*That is void of light.
I am but a traveler in his Service.
I am his child of Darkness, and
I seek his wisdom and cunning to
Aid me in my endeavor.
For it is all in his behalf.
Oh, Prince of Darkness,
Help me.*

The house began to stink of sulphur; the rain hammered on the roof, as if suddenly alive, a thousand demons screaming and flailing the air with fists of watery silver.

Janet cupped her breasts with her hands and gently squeezed, imagining Sam's hands on her body. She shivered in sexual anticipation as the wind and rain built in fury, pounding the home.

"Are you here?" Janet whispered.

The returning whisper came to her in a breath of stinking air.

Janet's smile was of the darkest evil. "Prince of the lower firmament, giver of light to the worlds beyond, I hear you and I will obey."

The perfume began to boil and steam in its glass container. Janet stood up and quickly stripped naked. She dipped her hand into the boiling mixture and it did not burn her.

She rubbed the mixture on her body, lingering long at her breasts and pubic area.

The wind pushed a tentacle of darkness into the house. The mist wound around Janet's ankle and traveled upward, to gather at her lower belly. Its touch was almost a caress.

The wind spoke to the young woman.

"I will do my best," she replied.

The mist snaked its way out of the house. The rain and wind abated in their furious assault. The tiny demons that seemed to possess each raindrop slipped back into the nether worlds.

Janet dressed in clean clothes, then poured the knockout portion into the glass of tomato juice she had prepared for Nydia. She knew Nydia liked a glass of juice each night before retiring.

On her way back to the den, she passed Little Sam's room, illuminated by a tiny night-light. The girl hissed her anger and fear at what was taking place.

Two halos of light had encircled the bed upon which the small child slept peacefully. The halos met in the center of the bed. One of the halos was pure white, clean-looking and brilliant. The other halo was dark and ominous appearing, with ragged edges and a filthy appearance. The halos seemed to be battling each other for control.

And the halo that was purest appeared to be just barely hanging on.

Janet tried to enter the room. A force prevented her from doing so, blocking her entrance with an invisible field.

"Leave!" she was instructed. "There is nothing you can do to prevent victory or defeat."

Janet backed away from the door and continued on to the den.

The child slept on, unaware that its future was being decided.

Judy Parish huddled on the front seat of the car. She was completely naked but not cold. She had been raped, but was feeling no anger toward her attacker. She had been beaten, but experienced no feelings of revenge for Will Gibson. She could not understand any of these emotions. Or lack of them.

The rain was now a quiet drizzle.

Judy looked over at Will. The man lay against the door on the driver's side. His breathing had slowed and his color had returned. He was naked from the waist down. He opened his eyes and looked at the teenager.

"How do you feel, Judy?"

"Strange."

"Yes, I know. I only became one of them a few hours ago."

"One of them. What am I?" She sat up on the seat. She made no attempt to cover her nakedness.

"I—am not certain," Will answered truthfully. "But I know that we are not—we have left some part of us behind and have entered into a new—dimension, I guess we could call it. Somehow I know it will all be explained to us a week from Monday. On October the thirty-first."

"Why then?" She reached over and began stroking his soft penis.

"I don't know."

She moved across the seat and bent her head. She opened her mouth and took him.

Will groaned and wound his fingers into her golden hair, and pushed his growing penis further into her mouth.

Just before leaving the Draper house, Sam said, "Halloween. October the thirty-first. That is when their time will run out. At midnight." He glanced at Nydia for confirmation; to see if she had received the same silent message. She nodded her head.

"But remember, Sam—all of you—Satan can and will change the rules in the middle of the game," Nydia cautioned.

"Game! Rules!" Monty said. "I keep hoping this is all a bad dream. That in the morning it will all be only a memory."

"I still have memories from the siege at Falcon House," Sam said. "Believe me, Monty, it isn't a dream; it's a nightmare."

"I still have doubts," Viv said. "I simply refuse to believe any of this is actually taking place. It's a joke of some sort, that's all."

"I believe it," Joe said grimly. "I don't want to, but I do. Well, I'm goin' home. Check on Nellie. I'm worried about her. See you tomorrow, Chief. Night, Viv, Father Le Moynes." He nodded his head at Sam and Nydia. Young couple spooked the hell out of him. Woman looked like a damned gypsy, and everybody knows them people are real funny. Can tell your fortune and all that stuff. Joe resisted an urge to back off the porch.

Sam glanced at his watch. Eleven o'clock. "We are reasonably safe on a Sunday," he said. "Covens don't like to tempt the Almighty too much. But not all of them fear Sunday. And if the Devil himself is here, Sunday won't make a bit of difference to him."

"That's nice to know," Monty said with a sigh.

"Bull!" Viv said.

NINE

Patsy had been amazed to see so many of her friends and fellow students at the Giddon mansion. It appeared that at least a full seventy-five percent of her class was in attendance. None of them appeared to be overly surprised to see her.

She walked up to a group of young people gathered near the black-draped altar. They were staring at the naked woman on the altar. She seemed to be in some sort of trance. Alma Nelson, a girl in Patsy's class, smiled at her.

"I was wondering when those goody-shoes of yours would begin to get dirty, Patsy."

"I'm only here to see what's going on," Patsy said with a primness that didn't quite come off. "I'll probably leave in a few minutes."

Claude Sullivan laughed at her. "No, you won't." Claude was sixteen, in Patsy's class. "You're not about to leave."

"I can if I want to," Patsy said defensively.

"Yeah, maybe," May Kendall looked at her and smiled. "But I don't think you really want to leave. Sides, look across the room, Patsy. Over there by that big picture of a man and woman screwing."

Patsy looked, squinting her eyes to peer through the gloom. She should have been surprised. Should have, but was not. For the past several hours, beginning with her struggles by the river with Jon, and ultimately her surrender to her lusts, Patsy had known she was only fooling herself; had been kidding herself about her feelings toward her faith. She had sensed something evil in this town some months back; had known it was real the times she lay in her bed and masturbated, allowing erotic scenes to play through her young fertile mind.

The girl sighed and let the Dark One have his way with her. She accepted the Prince of Evil. She drained her cup of juice and stared at

the man and woman who stood quietly, looking at her, smiling across the room. The man unzipped his pants and removed his penis, holding it in his hand and smiling at the teenager.

It was Patsy's mother and father.

The old man opened his eyes, trying to make out the shapes standing by his bed. He could hear the sounds of his wife's breathing beside him. The man hoped she would not wake up and have to see what faced them out of the night. Was he awake? Marie Fowler, Dan Golden, and Jerry Jackson stood at the foot of the bed. Marie was still wearing her blood-stained sheet, circles of dried blood denoting where her breasts had been. The paramedics were dressed in hospital garb. The three were grinning at him, their grins a terrible sight in the darkness of the bedroom.

"You are old," Marie spoke to the man. "You have lived your time and more." Her words were hollow sounding, as if coming from far away. "But we are prepared to give you eternal life."

"I'm dreamin'," the retired farmer said.

"You are not dreaming," Dan said.

"I knew I shouldn't 'ave watched 'at 'oddamn movie 'ast night," the old man said. His teeth were in a glass by the bed, the words coming out slurred. "I 'new 'at sum-bitch would gimmie nightmares."

"He is a fool," Jerry said.

"Then we shall send them both to the pits," Marie said.

She stepped around the old four-poster bed and put a hand on the old man's chest. He tried to rise but found he could not. It was then, while he experienced the supernatural strength of the mangled woman and the coldness of her hand, that he knew it was not a dream. This was real.

He opened his toothless mouth to scream.

The bloodied woman covered his lips with hers. Her breath was foul, stinking of death. She gnawed at his mouth, sucking the blood that began to flow. Then he felt lances of pain in his mouth. The woman was eating his tongue. His mouth filled with blood. Beside him, his wife of fifty years thrashed on the bed as the paramedics sucked at her neck, pulled life from her.

Marie tore open the man's neck, lapping at the blood that erupted in fountains from the wounds. The old woman had ceased her strugglings. Only the twitching of her hands signaled that within her a spark of life remained. Soon that was gone.

The trio dragged the old man and his wife from the blood-soaked sheets, dragging them out the back door. In the darkness low growls greeted them.

The bodies were dumped on the ground. The two men and the

woman lurched and faded into the night. The Beasts lumbered forward, red-rimmed eyes hot in the night.

They feasted.

Janet Sakall heard the car doors slam. Lying on the couch in the den, she smiled. Janet had no fear of Sunday. Very few in this coven did.

Janet heard the storm door open. She hid her smile. All was ready in her dark world.

For Sam Balon, a young man whose faith had been tested to the limits and had stood firm against the evil; a young man who had spoken with and fought alongside the mightiest of God's warriors ... his faith was again to be tested. As was his wife, Nydia. The town of Logandale was set to erupt like pus from a large boil, spewing its corruption over all who came near.

Sam stepped into the room.

"Hi, Sam," Janet said, smiling sweetly.

BOOK TWO

*And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before.*

—Poe

ONE

"You lookin' a sight better," Joe said to his wife. "How you feelin'?"

"I feel better than I have in months, Joe," she replied with a smile.

Something about his wife had changed. Joe recalled the words he'd heard back at the chiefs house: "Trust no one. Be suspicious of everyone. But don't be overt with your suspicions. Let them think everything is all right. We're outnumbered."

But Nellie? Joe couldn't believe she would be a part of such horror.

Joe tried to pretend that nothing about her had changed. But it was no good. She had changed. When he'd left the house, she had been pale and listless, her hair containing no body or life. Now, just a few hours later, Nellie appeared to be a new person. Eyes shining with health, color to her face. And what was that smell? Smelled like ... Jesus! It was the odor of sulphur.

Joe sighed. Was any of this true? Was the Devil in Logandale? Aw, shit... he didn't know what to think or believe.

Nellie smiled at him and walked toward him, holding out her arms.

The phone rang.

Joe jerked it up, suddenly very much relieved for the interruption. "Yeah?"

Mille LaMeade down at the station. "Joe? Jim Peters didn't show for his shift. Who you want me to call in?"

Joe lifted his eyes, once more looking at his wife. Something was all out of whack here. He could feel it. Her eyes were so ... strange. Is it my imagination? Am I letting my suspicions get all out of hand? Yeah ... maybe. He didn't know.

"Joe? You there?" Mille asked.

"What! Oh, yeah. Ah—Mille, better let me come on down and check on that—problem. Sounds like we might have trouble. I'll be there in a second, O.K.?"

Joe turned and was startled to see Nellie standing right next to him. He had not heard her walk across the room. She licked her lips and he

could see her tongue was no longer that sickly color he had grown accustomed to. And he knew—he *knew*—this was not the same woman he had loved and married. Knew she had somehow changed into ... hell, he didn't know what she was, had become. It was ... it looked like she was healthy. She was too healthy. No way, Joe thought, no way she could have been healed.

But maybe the Good Lord had healed her. Joe's thoughts went winging back more than forty years, back to that little country church in Kentucky, back to the words and actions of that visiting preacher who practiced the laying on of hands. Joe had damn sure seen a miracle that night; watched that old crippled woman throw away her crutches and *walk*, by God. Could that be it? Did God intervene here in some mysterious way, His wonders to perform?

Maybe. Maybe so. "We got to talk some, Nellie," Joe said. "We got to sit down and really talk some things out. We'll do that when I get back, O.K.?"

"Do you really have to go, Joe? It's so late, and—well, I kind of had plans for us, you know?"

Joe could not believe his ears. Did she really want to have sex? Nellie? She had not craved sex for more than a year. Maybe longer than that. No. No, this was definitely not the work of the Almighty.

Something shifted in Nellie's eyes as she looked at her husband. There is no love there, Joe thought, meeting her eyes. That's pure hate. But why? That was the question that vexed the police officer. Vex, he thought. Rhymes with hex. He again went winging back in time, back to the mountains of his youth, to the superstitions of the older mountain people, sayings and feelings he could still recite and experience chapter and verse. Joe felt cold fear wash over him. He grew uncomfortable under her hot gaze.

"Gotta go," Joe muttered. He felt a tingle in the small of his back as he walked out the door. He was sweating in the damp coolness of night. He was relieved as he got in his car. Glad to be out of that house. He looked back at the house. Nellie was framed in the light pouring from the picture window. He could see her face, dark with hate. Her eyes seemed to burn through the night. Joe pulled away. He did not think he ever wanted to go back there. He corrected that. He was *never* going back inside that house. Not if he could help it.

He pulled into the police parking area and went inside. Logandale's lone female police officer was sitting behind the desk. She looked up as he entered.

"Something funny going on in this town, Joe," Mille said. "And I mean I can feel it right down to my toes."

"Tell me," Joe muttered. He cleared his throat. "Mille, what's wrong with Jim?"

Mille stood up and Joe appraised her. It was not the first time he had viewed her charms. Mille LaMeade had the dark complexion and snapping dark eyes that came with many of the people of French-Canadian ancestry. A small woman, almost petite, but oh Lord, was she stacked up proper.

"Well, first it was his wife on the phone," Mille said. "But there was a lot of music and laughing going on in the background. A party going on. I could hear Jim's voice. He was telling dirty jokes and cussing. Still his wife called him in sick."

"Cussing? But Jim don't cuss. He don't smoke, he don't drink, he don't do nothin'. Jim Peters is about the dullest potato I've ever met."

"You should have heard it tonight."

"Come on. Ride with me. We'll just take us a little run out to his house. See what's goin' on."

Joe let Mille lead the way to the patrol car. Nice ass on her, too, he thought.

He looked up in surprise as the Flaubert girl drove past the station. Late for her to be out.

"It is time for the greeting dance," Norman Giddon announced. He walked into the center of the circle, holding out his arms. The circle of men and women fell silent. "It is time for us to welcome our new guests, show them all the pleasures the Prince can offer. Let it begin."

In the darkness of a shrouded corner of the mansion, a drum began beating slowly, pounding out its throbbing message. A flute joined in, the notes playing solemnly. The inner circle, made up of black-robed women, began moving counterclockwise; the outer circle, consisting of black-robed men, began moving in a clockwise direction.

"Come," May spoke to Patsy, taking her hand. "Let's join in. It's time for our initiation."

Patsy did not protest, mentally or physically. The wine had been cold and sweet and very strong, and it contained a very powerful aphrodisiac. The potion was working within the young people as they formed the third circle, holding hands. Sonny Bunche, a senior at Logandale High, held onto Patsy's hand. He grinned at her, the message contained within the grin very plain. Patsy looked around for Jon but could not locate him. The aphrodisiac pounded within her body. She looked up at Sonny.

"Later," she said to the young man.

"I heard that, baby," Sonny replied.

The circles moved in their dance.

Movement by the altar caught Patsy's eyes. She looked up and saw Jon standing naked beside the black-draped altar, his manhood hanging heavy and limp. But Patsy knew only too well the first sight

was deceiving. Jon's eyes appeared glazed. She dropped her eyes and concentrated on the dance, moving with the circles. It seemed the more physical exertion she engaged in the more sexually charged she became. Soon she was caught up in the heat and passion of the dance, humming along with the others.

Outside, the Beasts howled and danced and pranced, flinging their hairy arms upward and strutting about, their cloven hooves making no imprint in the soft damp earth. They spat at the heavens and hissed their contempt at their Master's enemy.

As midnight came straight up, Norman Giddon, upon receiving the signal from the coven leader, held up a hand for silence. The drum and flute ceased. Only the panting from the men and women in the circles could be heard.

"Let the young people come forward. Make way for our Master's new servants, so they may be received into his kingdom and enjoy all the fruits of his worship."

The circles opened, the young people marched forward, Patsy among them. Sometime during the dancing, her blouse had opened and she had discarded it. She could not remember doing so. But it didn't matter. Some of the others had torn off and thrown away most of their clothing, to stand almost naked in the circle of Satan worshippers.

The coven leader, Frank Gilbert, began his series of questions, the young people responding with the correct answers.

"Renounce all ye have been taught before this night. All Christian teachings and virtues. Do ye do so?"

"Aye!" the young people shouted in one voice. "All praise the Dark One."

Patsy did not understand how she knew what to say; she only accepted and did as her mind instructed.

Gilbert waved his hand and smoke erupted from behind the altar. "*Puellas and Puers*, do ye swear your hearts to the Prince of Darkness?"

"Aye!" came the shout.

Gilbert waved his hand and a woman walked to the altar, kneeling in front of Jon. She stroked him and orally brought him to hardness. The boy crawled between the legs of the naked woman and positioned himself. Sweat bathed the woman. Putting her hand on his stiffness, she guided him.

"We invoke the powers of the old gods!" Gilbert called, his voice firm. "We call upon them to give their blessings to this gathering."

The odor of burning sulphur permeated the room.

The adults began to hum and sway back and forth.

Gilbert shouted, "So mote it be!"

Jon shoved, taking the woman with one stroke. She cried out in a

strange language and wrapped her legs around his waist, holding him firm within her.

"Show your contempt for the Christian God!" Gilbert screamed the words.

The boys and girls, men and women, began cursing the Lord God Almighty, heaping verbal filth upon His head in a hideous outpouring of blasphemy. Bibles were produced, the pages torn from them and burned and spat upon. The gathering coven urinated on pictures and paintings of Christ. The odor of sulphur became a thin haze that lingered over the worshippers of the Prince of Darkness. Filth rolled from the tongues of those who were now entering the gates of Satan's domain, rejecting the teachings of God Almighty for the fleshy earthly pleasures of Satan.

And thus it would always be so. For these coven members, there would be and could be no turning back, for God Almighty is a vengeful God. He will tolerate no other Gods before Him. And the punishment is death.

The floor of the huge room became a tangle of naked men and women, boys and girls, men with men, women with women, as they consummated the pact between themselves and the Prince of Darkness. Patsy felt her clothing pulled from her. Hands on her body, squeezing and entering. She was pushed to the floor. Her legs spread, she felt hot hardness entering her. She was sore but groaned her pleasure. She opened her eyes and looked into the grinning face of her father.

"All praise the Dark One," her father panted, as he violated his daughter.

"All praise the Dark One," Patsy dammed herself. She pulled his mouth to hers and kissed him.

Outside, the wind blew hot and stinking.

Sam was too keyed up to sleep, but he did not find it odd that Nydia went on to bed after drinking her customary glass of juice. Janet sat in the den, watching Saturday Night Live on TV. Sam sat with her; Janet on the couch, Sam in his easy chair.

Janet looked over at Sam and smiled shyly. He returned the smile, asking, "What are you grinning about, Janet?"

"Promise you won't get mad?"

"I promise," he said with a quiet laugh. Sam was experiencing a mild sort of euphoria. He could not understand the heady feelings, since he knew only too well what lay ahead of him, but he was grateful for the emotions; anything to take his mind off what faced him at dawn.

He did not realize he was facing it now.

"Well—you and Nydia usually stay out later than you did tonight.

And I—uh—usually watch the—ah—that other channel."

Sam grinned. He knew what channel she was talking about. So she had discovered the porn channel and the decoder that brought it in. "Well, I could say that I objected, Janet, but I really don't. I would have watched the thing at my house when I was your age, if we'd had it. Besides, I imagine you already know most of what goes on there, right?"

"Well, yeah," she admitted. "But it's tough being caught between a girl and a woman. You know, all kinds of feelings and no one to ask questions and no one to explain a lot of things. It's tough."

"Don't your parents talk to you about—things?"

"Oh, no! My mom and dad get so uptight about those types of conversations. They get tongue-tied and end up confusing me more than ever."

And despite himself, Sam found his tongue saying, "What is it you want to know, Janet?"

"Well," she said softly and shyly, "you know—I mean—I was raped back at Falcon House, but that isn't something I like to think about. I mean, really, I've pretty well managed to put all that out of my mind. Talking with the doctors afterward really helped me. And that was—the rape, anything but fun. I mean, Jesus!" Sam did not notice her slight grimace of disgust at the mention of His name. "How can you enjoy being forced to do something?"

"I understand. Go on."

"Those people on that channel," she said, pointing to the TV set. "They look like they really *like* it when they—you know, do it. They look like it's fun. And it looks like fun to me."

Sam knew how he should—as an adult—respond to that. He knew he was treading on dangerous ground, but he could not find the words to put the topic to rest. He shook his head to clear away the cobwebs that had gathered, clouding his ability to reason. He startled himself when the words rolled from his mouth.

"Ask me anything you like, Janet. I'll try to explain it as best I can." And show you if you want it that way, the thought jumped into his mind. And this time his mind offered no objection.

The teenager left her place on the couch and sat in front of Sam, on the ottoman. She sat very close to him. Sam felt her presence very strongly. She was wearing some sort of strange-smelling perfume, and he found it appealing. She began asking questions—very personal questions, questions that he would have normally found very embarrassing. But on this night, he answered them frankly.

When had she opened her blouse? Sam wondered, as he fought to keep his eyes from her full young breasts. Jesus! She wasn't wearing a bra. And her nipples were aroused ... and arousing him.

What the hell is the matter with me? Sam questioned. Something is very wrong here.

But the thought slipped away from him as quickly as it came.

He looked at the small table by his chair. A bourbon and water was there. He didn't remember fixing it, or asking Janet to fix it. Oh, well, he thought, must be the tension of the day coming out. He picked up the drink and sipped it. Exactly right.

He did not know it was his fourth drink.

You would like to watch the porn channel together, the words came to him. "Why don't we watch the porn channel together?" he suggested. "Might be fun."

"All right!" Janet said.. "I'd like that. We'll keep the volume down low so we won't wake up Nydia or Little Sam."

"They won't wake up," Sam said. "Nydia could sleep through a hurricane and Little Sam takes after her in that respect."

Sam could not remember Janet's getting in the chair with him, but there she was. And Sam did not object even a little. And when did her blouse get unbuttoned all the way down and pulled out of her jeans?

Who knows and who cares? he thought. Sam fondled her breasts, feeling the nipples harden under his fingers. She sighed and arched her back, pushing her breasts up to his mouth. Sam obliged the body request.

The scenes on the Four XXXX channel, as Sam and Nydia called it, were vivid, with nothing left out. Sam felt himself gaining a slight erection. It was odd, for he and Nydia never took this channel seriously, watching it more for laughs than for stimulation.

"I'd like to do that," Janet murmured, stirring in his arms. "I'd *really* like to do that with you."

The screen showed a woman masturbating a man.

Sam did not reply, nor did he object when Janet's fingers touched his crotch, lingering there. She ran her fingers down the length of his growing erection.

And then she was gripping him in her small hand, stroking him while her breath came hot on his cheek. Janet kissed him—anything but a sisterly kiss. Her tongue was in his mouth and she was masturbating him to rock hardness.

A moment of lucidity reached him, and he wavered. Then a cloud covered his mental functionings. Janet was naked in his arms and straddling him. He tried to push her away, but the attempt was weak and he felt himself penetrating into the hot tightness of the girl.

Afterward, the scenes would be blurred in recall. But one would be vivid. He pushed the girl from him at the moment of ejaculation, his semen spilling on the chair and floor.

"This is *wrong!*" Sam said.

"Oh, Sam!" Janet said, quickly dressing as Sam was pulling up his trousers and buckling his belt. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Forget it," Sam said. "It won't happen again."

Wanna bet? she thought. She thought she might have trapped some of the life-giving seed of Balon within her. She was almost certain of it.

The phone rang. The abrupt shrillness seemed to jar Sam out of what remained of his drug-induced state.

"Sam? Joe Bennett here. Sorry to trouble you this late, but I think we got a problem with the Logandale P.D. A big problem."

Nydia literally stumbled into the den. Her eyes looked dazed and her walk was uncertain.

"Nydia!" Janet cried, running to her. She helped the woman to a chair. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," she replied haltingly. "I—think it was a nightmare. I awakened—frightened."

Nydia had not yet noticed what was on the TV. Janet turned the set off and said, "Let me get you some milk."

"That would be nice, Janet." She looked at Sam. "More trouble, honey?"

"Maybe." He turned back to the phone, lifting it to his ear. "Sorry, Joe. Had a problem here at home. Would you say that again?"

"I'm with Mille LaMeade. She called me at my house 'bout an hour or so ago. Maybe an hour and a half. Said Jim Peters had called in sick. I come down and we went over to Jim's house. Big party goin' on. Everybody drunk and raisin' hell, swappin' wives and girlfriends and such stuff as you only read about in books. Jim told me right to my face to kiss his ass. He was through with the P.D. and me and Chief Draper and the rest of the goody-two-shoes motherfuckers in this town. And Carl Medley and Bob Carson was with him. And that right there is all the Logandale P.D."

"Have you told Monty?"

"Yeah. But he don't know what to do. Hell, Sam, Monty called the mayor and the mayor told him not to worry none about it; said there wasn't nothin' gonna happen here 'cause nobody was comin' in here to do nothin'. Now ain't that the goddamnedest thing you ever heard a grown man say?"

"It's strange, all right."

"*Strange!* Strange is a woman with three tits and no snatch. That's strange. This here is—hell, I don't know what this is."

"Where will you be, Joe?"

"On patrol, I reckon. Just me and Mille left."

"Is she acting all right?"

"Oh, yeah. Mille's O.K. She was a tough little cookie when she was

growin' up. Done things make a sailor blush. But when she straightened up her act, she done it proper. Devil come up to Mille, she'd bust him on the snoot and spit in his eye."

Sam grinned. "Sounds like my kind of lady. O.K., Joe. Let me get a few hours sleep and I'll see you first thing in the morning. Probably at the cafe. Then we'll meet with Monty and talk this out."

"Right. There's some other matters I want to tell ya'll about, but they'll keep 'til first light, since I ain't goin' back home. See you in a few hours."

Joe hung up.

Sam did not connect the *ain't goin' back home* with anything ominous. He thought Joe only meant he would be on patrol all night, nothing more. He went to Nydia's side.

"Feeling better, honey?"

"I think so. Yes." She sipped at the milk Janet had so thoughtfully brought her. She looked at Janet. "You go to bed, young lady."

"Yes, ma'am," Janet said with a smile. She left the den and went into the room she used when she slept over. "Fucking bitch," she said, when the door had closed behind her.

Janet looked toward the north. "I tried, Master. I truly tried."

Outside, the wind blew hotly, as if in a forgiving and understanding way. It changed, speaking darkly to the girl. "You succeeded, my pretty. You did well."

Janet nodded her head and smiled. Sam's seed was in her body.

Another demon was growing.

TWO

Guilt lay heavy on Sam's mind when he awakened before dawn to leave the sleeping side of his wife. He simply could not believe he had done those things with Janet. He was all man, yes, and he would be lying if he said he had never entertained the thought of other women—but that was as far as it had ever gone. And Sam was adult enough to realize and accept that Nydia—just as any woman—had her daydreams and fantasies. But like Sam, that was as far as it had gone.

He looked in on Janet. Still sleeping, and sleeping peacefully. Sam again shook his head at what he had done. He would have to tell Nydia. But God, he wasn't looking forward to that.

He fixed a cup of coffee and took it with him, after making certain the house was securely locked. He looked at the orchard where he had shot the Beast. It lay peaceful in the pre-dawn stillness. The stars were beginning to fade and faint light was tinting the eastern horizon as Sam got in his pickup truck and backed out of the drive. He pointed the nose of the truck toward town, toward Clint's Cafe.

He saw Joe and Mille sitting alone at a table. Upon entering, he thought Joe looked a little strained. Sam attributed that to weariness until he had ordered breakfast and coffee and sat down at the table with the two remaining Logandale police officers, not counting the chief.

"Take a look over there," Joe said, cutting his eyes.

Sam looked. A cross hung upside down on the wall behind the counter. It was beginning. And he felt Sunday would be no safer for believers than any other day—not as far as this coven was concerned. "You've told Mille?"

"Yeah. Figured that was the best thing. She didn't much believe me 'til after we seen what was happenin' out to the Giddon place. Strange doin's out there, Sam."

The image of his making love to Janet once more filled his mind. He also felt shame wash over him. He took a deep sigh and fought the images away. He dreaded the moment of facing Nydia and telling her. But he knew he must. He came back to the present. "Strange doings? Such as what, Joe?"

"We parked down the road from the mansion, up on a bluff overlooking the road. Must have been two, maybe three hundred folks, of all ages, come out of that place and drive toward town. Lots of kids, high school and college. Near 'bouts all the professors and staff from out to Nelson College was there. And a lot of parents was there—and so was their kids."

"There is no such thing as incest in the language of the Devil," Sam explained. "As a matter of fact, it's encouraged. Brings the family closer together, so to speak," he added dryly.

"My father, my brother, and my youngest sister came out of that house," Mille said. "My little sister is only fourteen. All this is adding up to me now," she said, putting dark eyes on Sam's face. "I've been noticing some—well, *odd* things happening around town. Like the number of people who have stopped attending church. At first I didn't pay any attention to it; it was such a gradual thing. Then I began picking up on it when it began at my church. We're down to about—oh, maybe a fourth of our members attending any given mass."

Odd, Sam thought, as the waitress, wearing a uniform that looked as though it hadn't been washed in a month, put his breakfast in front of him. I wonder why Father Le Moyne didn't say anything about that?

When the waitress departed, taking her stinking body and filthy clothing with her, but leaving a stench behind, Sam said, "Did you try to talk to Father Le Moyne about it?"

"Yes. He was aware of it, and it concerned him. You see, Sam, this is it for Father Le Moyne. He'll never have another church. He's had some—personal problems."

"That's interesting," Sam said. "What kind of problems?" He looked down at his breakfast and it turned his stomach. The plate was filthy, had not been washed in God knows how long, and the food was floating in stinking grease. He pushed the plate from him.

"Sickenin', ain't it?" Joe said.

"At least that," Sam muttered.

"No one knows for sure about Father Le Moyne," Mille said. "Some say it was a woman. That he fell in love, had an affair. Some say he was burned out performing an exorcism. I don't know. I do know he's had problems with the bottle."

Sam recalled the way the priest had knocked back the booze at his quarters.

Mille said, "I remember my mother telling me—years ago—that Father Le Moyne had butted heads with the Devil one too many times and finally the Devil beat him. I don't know any of the particulars, Sam. I just know that Father Le Moyne's been here for a long, long time, and it's accepted knowledge that he'll never leave."

The cafe was rapidly filling up, the patrons, to a person, both male and female, giving the trio hard looks, ugly looks. The cafe began to stink of unwashed bodies.

Laughter came rolling to them from a group of men and women seated at a far corner. The words followed. "Sure would like to have me some of the little French snatch," a man said. "Then ol' Ralph would turn her over and stick it up her ass."

Hard dirty laughter followed. Joe flushed and started to rise from his chair. Sam put out a hand, stopping the man.

"Let's get out of here, people. But first I want to confirm a suspicion." He caught the counterman's eyes. "This breakfast is terrible!" Sam shouted. "And the plate is filthy. You really expect me to pay for this slop?"

"No!" the man returned the shout from behind the counter. "It's on the house, you son-of-a-bitch! And you can all get your asses out of my place. Don't come back—none of you. We don't need your kind in here."

"Your kind," Joe muttered. "That what you was waitin' on, Sam?"

"That's it," Sam said.

The trio walked outside, very conscious of all eyes in the place on their backs. They all breathed a bit easier when they were outside in the clean, fresh coolness of morning air. Dawn was breaking, spreading its golden light.

"Gonna be a gorgeous day," Joe said. He added, "All things taken into consideration, that is."

Janet was very quiet that morning, and Nydia did not understand the silence, for the teenager was usually bubbling over with love of life. So Nydia thought. She asked the girl what was the matter.

Janet looked at her for a moment, and then burst into tears. Nydia went to her, putting her arms around the girl.

"Nydia," she said, "I was so afraid last night. I didn't know what to do. I still don't. Please, Nydia, if I tell you, will you promise not to tell Sam? I mean, you have to swear to me you won't tell. Cross your heart and promise you won't tell him I told you."

Nydia dried the girl's eyes with a napkin. She smiled at her. "I promise, Janet. I won't tell Sam. Whatever it is, I won't tell him."

Janet nodded her head. "Well, after you went to bed last night, Sam started drinking. The glass is still on the table by his chair. I fixed him—I don't know, several drinks. I don't know how many he fixed himself. A lot. I was watching Saturday Night Live on TV and he changed it to that—that awful channel."

"Awful channel?"

"You know, the one—that shows everything. All the naked people doing—it."

"Sam did that? With you in the room!" Nydia was filled with outrage.

"Then he asked me if I ever thought about doing things like that. Nydia, I swear to you I'm a good girl. I swear it! Ever since that happened to me—you know, at Falcon House up in Canada, having sex has been the furthest thing from my mind." Janet willed tears to roll from her eyes and they came in silver torrents, spilling down her cheeks.

Nydia's thoughts toward Sam darkened, clouds of anger and revenge colored her mind. "I believe you, Janet," she said, putting her arms around the girl, holding her.

"I didn't know what to do when he pulled me in the chair with him, Nydia. It scared me. Then we lay like that for several minutes, watching those naked people have sex—and other stuff. It was really grossing me out."

Nydia's eyes were dark pools of smoldering anger. "Go on, Janet. I want to hear it all."

"I told him that you'd wake up and there would be trouble, and I'd get the blame for it. He said don't worry, 'cause he had put something in your juice to make you sleep, and you could sleep through a hurricane, anyway, and so could Little Sam—he got that from you."

"Yes, that's true. Sam is fond of saying that. Noise hardly ever disturbs my sleep. And I did sleep unnaturally hard for a time last night. It must have been the drug that knocked me out so and caused those dreams."

"Sam said he'd been wanting to—this is embarrassing. Nydia. Wanting to make it with me for a long time. He said if I said anything about it, he'd call me a liar and you'd believe him over me."

"Go on, Janet. But I probably can guess the rest."

"I don't know if you noticed last night, when you came in the den, but my shirt was unbuttoned some. I mean, I had real quick like buttoned it up."

Once again, the dark force entered Nydia's thoughts. She visualized and replayed the events of earlier that morning. It was as the girl said. She could see her buttoning her shirt. Could see her going to the TV and turning off the set. And Sam had been ... what? Confused. Yes. That and red-faced, as well. And his clothing was rumpled.

Goddamn him!

"Go on, Janet," Nydia bit at the words.

"Well, he—this is really embarrassing for me. Sam unbuttoned my blouse and unzipped my jeans. He—began feeling me. Nydia, I swear I didn't know what to do. I wanted to yell, but I didn't. I just couldn't. He had said he put something in your juice. What was the point of yelling? I just—I just let him have his way. He undressed me and slipped off his pants. He was real big and hard. He took my hand and put it on his—you know. Told me to jack him off; said I'd like it, he was sure.

"Nydia, I was so scared I didn't know what to do. He—got me wet. I couldn't *help it*! He was breathing real funny and saying really weird things. Scared me. Then he just picked me up—he's real strong, you know—and sat me down on him. He hurt me when he—well, how can I say it? Put it in. That's a gross way of saying it, isn't it? I don't know what would have happened if the phone hadn't rung. Then you came into the room and I was never so glad to see anyone in all my life. When the phone rang, Sam practically threw me off him and started jerking on his clothes.

"Nydia, I think Sam was drunk; that's what made him go kinda wild. It won't happen again. I can promise you that."

"It certainly won't!" Nydia said. She put a hand on Janet's shoulder. "Janet, I don't blame you. Don't think that for a minute."

"Thank you, Nydia. I can't tell you how much that means to me."

"Let's talk about this incident, Janet. Sam might have made you pregnant."

"Oh, no, ma'am. No—he jerked away before it ever came to that. He got mad about that, too."

"Serves him right," Nydia said tightly. "Are you sure, Janet? Be very sure, now."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure."

"Well, Monday I'll call my doctor in Blaine. I'll personally take you

to see him. Just to be on the safe side."

"All right," Janet said sweetly. Monday, you bitch, she thought, none of you will be allowed to leave. You will all remain here—forever.

"Nydia—this has nothing to do with Sam, but I've been trying to think of a way to tell you for a few weeks."

Nydia forced a smile. "Now what, Janet?"

"Do you know Jon Le Moyne?"

"No. Is he any relation to Father Le Moyne?"

"Nephew. Anyway, the talk around school is that you and Jon have been seeing each other. Having an affair. Jon is supposed to be—well—real big—down there, if you know what I mean."

That bit of gossip put the icing on the cake, shoved in the candles, lit them, and blew them out. Nydia turned and savagely slammed a pot into the sink. The handle broke off.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" she said. "I've never even heard of Jon Le Moyne."

Janet had to turn her head to prevent Nydia from seeing her smile of satisfaction. Everything was working out well. The name of Jon Le Moyne had been planted in Nydia's brain, and planted there by anger. She would not forget it.

It had been arranged that Sam would remember very little about the lovemaking; but just enough to fill him with guilt. All he could do was beg his wife's forgiveness.

And it would soon be arranged—only a matter of a few hours—for Nydia to meet Jon Le Moyne. While Sam would be conveniently away ... with another woman. It would work. The Master was proud of Janet's plan.

Yes, Janet thought, today would be the day. Nydia would be harboring ill feelings toward Sam—and the Master would see they became blacker as the minutes ticked past. And it was being arranged for Sam to meet another woman. Everything looked good. The oldest rule of warfare: Divide and conquer.

Janet now looked at Nydia through different eyes. She took in the woman's lushness. For a moment, the girl allowed herself the luxury of erotic thoughts: images of her making love to Nydia. But she quickly brushed those aside, for the Master would not approve of that at this time. Perhaps when matters were all taken care of. But not now.

"You want to take me home now, Miss Nydia?" Janet asked shyly.

Nydia turned around, her eyes red from holding back tears. "Sure, Janet. Let me get my coat."

Several times Monty had put his hand on the phone in the den, and several times he had pulled his hand away. If he called for help—would anybody believe him? He was sure something very odd was

going down in Logandale. But worshipping the Devil? Now that day had dawned, he had doubts. But what about the ungodly appearing creature Balon had shot in the orchard? The strange way a lot of people were behaving? Nearly his entire force quitting without notice? Bodies disappearing? People and animals tortured to death in strange and bizarre ways? Again he put his hand on the phone. Again he pulled it away.

He'd give it another day, max, before doing anything that might prompt the men in white coats to come drag him away, kicking and screaming to the funny farm.

"Honey," his wife spoke from the hall.

He looked at her and smiled. He never tired of looking at her. She was that beautiful. And had been on her way toward becoming a very successful fashion model when she elected to marry him. Monty could never understand why she made that move. But was ever so grateful that she did.

He noticed the frown on her face. "Something wrong, honey?"

She tapped her foot when she was angry. And she was tapping her foot now. "Very definitely wrong, Monty. We're being watched."

"By whom?"

"Two men in a car, parked out front. I don't know how long they've been there. Take a look."

He walked to the drapes and narrowly parted them. There they sat. Dan Evans and Phil Curtis. Two local ne'er-do-wells that were constantly in and out of all sorts of mischief and minor brushes with the law. Monty had arrested them both a dozen times over the years. But...

Then it came to him: The most successful lawyer in the county always was there to represent them, and he was the most successful lawyer in the county because he worked almost exclusively for...

Norman Giddon.

Coming together. And it was not a pretty package.

Monty turned from the window and started down the hall to the front door. His wife's voice stopped him. He looked over his shoulder at her.

"Don't go out there, Monty. Don't. For my sake. I'm getting frightened, Monty. Let's pack it up and in and get out of here. Just get the hell out!"

He could not believe what she was saying. "Honey, I'm the chief of police here. The law. The man. I've—I took an oath to uphold the law. I can't just cut and run. I *won't* cut and run."

"I felt it last night, Monty," she blurted. "I know it's real, now."

"Felt what, Viv?"

"Evil."

"Now just hang on, baby. Just—"

"Don't go out there!"

He took his hand off the doorknob. "All right," he told her. "If it will make you feel better, I won't go outside. But we're going to have to face this—thing— whatever in the hell it is, sooner or later."

"Let it be later. Hell with it."

Something thumped on the back porch. A subhuman shriek came to the man and woman. Viv paled and backed against the wall for support. Monty found his pistol and walked down the hall, into the kitchen, and paused at the back door. He jacked back the hammer of his .357 and jerked open the door. He almost puked up his breakfast.

"No," Joe said. "I'm so keyed up I wouldn't be able to sleep none. Let's go on over to the chiefs house and hash this thing out. We got to do something. This standin' around without a plan is gettin' to me."

Sam glanced at Mille. "You must be exhausted, Mille."

"I'm tired, but like Joe, I want to find out just what is going on around here." She shook her head, then brushed back a lock of dark hair. "Too much is coming at me all at once. All this business about the Devil and cults and covens—I—I'm just confused and don't know what to think or believe. I don't know whether to be scared or think this entire thing is one great big joke. Then I think about Marie Fowler and those *horrible* things that were done to her. Judith disappears. Joe tells me he and Chief Draper lost radio contact with Will when he went down in that hole after Judith. The rope is untied—by somebody—and Joe and Monty believe Will is dead. Then he reappears and Ginny tells me he was acting strange."

"Ginny?" Sam asked. "Who is Ginny and what's this about Will acting strange?"

"Ginny Potter. She's a friend of mine; we share an apartment. Yeah. She saw Will late yesterday afternoon. He was walking kind of—well, funny. Ginny said he lurched, kind of. He was pale, and something was the matter with the way he talked. Ginny said his tongue was—all swollen and real red."

Sam knew what the problem was. The walking dead.

Joe shrugged. "I don't know what's goin' on neither. Look, let's go on over to the chiefs house. I got something to tell you all."

Will and Judy slept under a blanket in the woods where Will had attacked her. The blanket was not to protect them from the cool air but to keep the sunlight from touching them. They had found they could not tolerate the light.

Marie and Dan and Jerry slept in the loft of a barn. Like Will and Judy, they waited for the night.

Logandale lay quiet under the Sunday sun.

Waiting for night.

"Oh, my God!" Viv hissed the words as she stood in the kitchen looking over her husband's shoulder.

A dog lay on the back porch. The animal had been skinned and strange markings cut into its skin. It had been completely disemboweled, the intestines and organs scattered all over the floor of the porch.

Monty heard his wife making choking sounds. He turned in time to see her race toward the half bath just off the kitchen. The sounds of her sickness came to him. Monty fought back his own nausea and used the tablecloth from the nook to cover the animal and the intestines, after he had kicked those into a pile. He stepped back into the kitchen and closed the door.

"You going to be all right?" he called through the closed bathroom door.

"Just fucking dandy," came her acid reply.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Monty grinned. When Viv got mad, she got stubborn, and she became very profane. Monty felt that Viv wouldn't leave now if someone held a gun to her head.

He heard cars pull into the drive and he walked to the door. Looking out, he saw the two men who had been watching the house were gone. Sam Balon, Joe, and Mille were walking up the sidewalk. He waved them in and briefly told them what had just happened.

"I'll take care of the dog," Joe said. He left the den.

Monty asked Mille, "Who's minding the store?"

"No one. I locked the place up."

"Why not?" Monty said, directing the question at no one in particular.

Viv entered the den. Her face was pale but there was a new set to her chin that silently told Monty she was going to see this thing through. He smiled at her.

"I'll make some coffee," she said. "I think we could all use some." She looked at Sam. "Have you had breakfast—any of you?"

"No, ma'am."

"I'll make some breakfast, too."

Joe walked back into the den. "Son-of-a-bitch do that to a dog oughta be horsewhipped. I wrapped the poor animal in a garbage bag and stuck that in another garbage bag. Put it in the trunk of the patrol car. I'll get rid of it later. Monty—I think—whatever it is we're facing has got to my wife," he blurted.

The others stood quietly, frozen in place, looking at Joe. Viv came out of the kitchen to stand in the archway, listening, a spatula in her hand.

Joe told them about Nellie.

"You can't know for sure, Joe," Viv said. "You just can't be."

"No, ma'am," he replied. "I can't. But all I got to go on is my feelin's. And I know damn well something ain't right in that house. Don't nobody recover that quickly. And the house was stinkin' like sulphur. Put it all together for me, folks. Add it all up and tell me what you think."

Sam looked at Mille. The young woman looked tired, her face drawn with fatigue. But she was tough; Sam sensed that. She would stand firm. He cut his eyes to Viv. She, too, appeared to be filled with a new resolve. Joe would stand tough; no backup in him. And Sam felt sure Monty wouldn't back up for anything or anybody.

Monty blew out a long breath. "I think we better start drawing up some battle plans."

"Against what, Chief?" Mille asked. "And with what? None of us have been physically threatened. What crimes have been committed? Is it against the law to worship Satan? Not to my knowledge. Me and Joe saw a bunch of people leaving the Giddon place last night, but that sure isn't against the law. While we were patrolling last night, we talked about this thing. I still don't quite believe everything that you all have said, but even if it's all true, what can we do until someone actually breaks a law. The answer is, obviously, nothing."

"Come on, everybody," Viv called from the kitchen. "Let's have some breakfast."

As they all tramped to the kitchen, the phone rang. Monty jerked it up. He listened for several moments. His face first grew red with anger, and then pale with shock. He said, "Very well, if that is your final word."

Monty slowly replaced the receiver. He seemed to have aged considerably.

Viv came to his side. "Monty? What is it? Why are you so pale?"

"That was Mayor Kowolski," Monty said slowly. "The board met last night. Called a special meeting. I have been relieved of duty—"

"Oh, Monty," his wife said.

"Drop the other shoe, Monty," Joe said. "I got a feelin' there's more."

"Yes," Monty said. "And it's coming together, all the pieces fitting, finally." He cleared his throat. "Well, Bert Sakall has been named interim chief until a permanent replacement is named. You've been fired, Mille. You, too, Joe. The board is giving us all a month's pay. But the clincher was this: He told me to inform both of you that the best thing we could do was get the hell out of this community and don't come back."

Mille LaMeade summed up the feelings of all present when she stuck out her chin and said, "Well—*fuck* the board!"

THREE

Father Daniel Le Moyne stood in the center aisle of his church. He experienced a dozen distinct and different emotions in the span of a few seconds. None of them pleasant. He looked at the silent, empty church. He clenched his hands into fists of rage, momentarily enjoying the emotion before mentally driving it from him and calming himself.

Not one person had come to mass. No one.

Now the priest knew what he must face. Again. And he was not looking forward to the task.

He cocked his head. Was that a car driving up, stopping? Yes. The priest listened for a moment. The front door of the church opened. Noah Crisp stood silhouetted in the brilliant sunlight that poured from the heavens.

"This time you've got to face him and beat him," Noah said, his voice slightly hoarse. "I know he's here, and so do you. We've both known for a long time. I know what people think about us, Daniel. I know people think I'm a borderline basket case. Maybe I am. But I have met him, seen him face to face, and lived to tell of it. That is something few people have ever managed to do. But so much for that. Tell me, how badly outnumbered are we?"

Father Le Moyne shook his graying head. "Probably five or six hundred to one."

"That many. Well—we will still have no choice."

"None."

"We should have done this years ago, Daniel. Even if it meant—and it would have—taking the law into our own hands."

"I didn't have the courage. I don't know if I have the courage to do it now."

Noah walked down the aisle to face the priest. "We both sinned, Daniel. But sins can be forgiven. What happened is past, and it has not and will not occur again." He looked around him at the empty church. "No one came to mass?"

"Not one person."

"So it's really, finally begun?"

"It appears that way."

"Let's drive around town. See if the same is or has occurred at other churches."

Father Le Moyne noticed, for the first time, the pistol stuck in Noah's belt. "I had heard you had forsaken your gentle beliefs for those of a more savage nature, Noah."

"I've changed a lot over the past four or five years, Daniel. And yes, it's been that long since we've talked."

"Almost five years," the priest muttered. "Where has the time gone?"

"To the Devil," the writer said flatly. "Quite literally."

Le Moyne had to smile at that.

"Get yourself armed with holy water, Daniel," Noah urged him.

But the priest shook his head. "Not yet. It isn't time for that."

The writer looked dubious ... and somewhat ludicrous, dressed in cowboy boots, jeans, a painter's smock, and beret cocked jauntily on his head. But the gun in his waistband was real, and his determination was strong. "Are you certain, Daniel?"

"As certain as I can be." He put a hand on his friend's arm. "Noah, I don't know if I have the faith to go through with this thing. I don't know if I have the strength. I don't know if God has any faith in me. Not in years. I—"

Noah slapped the priest. Backhanded the man of God across the face, rocking his head.

"Don't you *ever* say anything like that again, Daniel. Not at this juncture of our lives, and the lives of a small band of Christians out there. If I have to, Daniel, I'll use my fists to pound the faith back in you; or to bring it to the surface, as the case may be. Probably is. Do you understand all that, old friend?"

Through watery eyes caused by the abrupt and totally unexpected pop across the face, Father Le Moyne looked through a mist at the man. Physically, Le Moyne could have broken the writer in half. The priest was a big shambling bear of a man. But he was a gentle, loving type of man who abhorred any type of violence.

"You do have a way of getting your point across, Noah," Father Le Moyne said.

"I felt it quite necessary. And we'll speak no more of your supposedly 'lost faith.' Come on. We have a lot of work to do. His work, Father Le Moyne. We've got to salvage as many lost souls as possible. If it isn't too late."

"Yes. For us, as well," the priest reminded the man.

"We don't matter, Daniel. Not any longer. Not in the overall scheme of things. We were adults and fully aware of what we were doing." He shook his head. "No matter. There are young people out there," he said waving his hand, "who are lost, stumbling about in the evil darkness created by the Master of Night. We have to try to help them. One way or the other," he added, a grimness to his tone.

Father Le Moyne smiled. "You always did have a way with the English language, Noah."

"I used to, Daniel. I really did. I could have been a great writer. Well," he said grimacing, "perhaps not great, but a selling author, let us say. All that changed in the few hours before midnight, long ago. But I can still make a contribution to this world—we can, Daniel, you and I. So let's stop dillydallying about and get on with it."

"One moment," the priest said, holding up a hand. He went to his living quarters and returned carrying a cross. It looked to be about ten inches long and perhaps seven or eight inches across. "Cardinal Greiner blessed this cross, many years ago. I think this might be a better weapon—at this time—than anything else."

Noah smiled. "You're probably right, Daniel. But I'll keep my .357 for a backup. After you, Father."

While Daniel Le Moyne and Noah Crisp rode through the small town, each of them experiencing a sinking feeling at the sight of empty churches, Nydia was working herself into a monumental black rage—helped by darker forces, who chuckled with mirth at what was going on.

How *dare* Sam pull something like that! How could he do it?

She picked up a metal ashtray and hurled it across the room. The ashtray bounced off the wall and hit the floor with a clatter.

"Shit!" she yelled.

Little Sam began crying in his room. His outburst of fright at the sudden noise momentarily calmed Nydia. She went into the bedroom and picked him up, talking to him, soothing him.

"Why is it grown men—responsible men—go ape over a young girl? I wish I knew. I just do not understand it."

"Ape?" Little Sam said. "Go to zoo?"

"That's where he belongs," Nydia said. "Behind bars for a time. Maybe that would calm him down. The son-of-a—" She caught herself just in time. For Little Sam was very bright and very quick to pick up on words.

She calmed Little Sam and had him laughing by the time she put him on the floor of the den. She sat on the couch and quietly allowed her mood to worsen, not aware of the forces from the nether world influencing her mental machinations, and doing so with dark humor.

So Sam parted the teenage legs of Janet, she darkly mused. I wonder how many women he's screwed since we've been married? One? Ten? More than that? And how many lies has he told me? How many times has he said he was going to the college for research and actually been fucking someone else?

"Bastard!" she whispered.

Yes, the thought came to her. At least ten women. Haven't I seen him flirt more than once, when he thought I wasn't looking? Yes. Yes, I have.

Voices began playing in her head as her mind and abilities to reason became clouded.

"And what about that Flaubert girl? You don't suppose—"

Yes, Nydia thought. Yes. She would be a prime candidate.

"And why do you suppose Sam insisted, when you two were talking

about buying a satellite dish, upon having that filthy channel?"

I'm beginning to understand now.

"He's had other women here, hasn't he? Come on, admit it. Those nights you went out with the girls— sometimes several nights a week—did Sam ever object?"

No.

"Don't you find that rather odd?"

I do now.

"And many times, when you were tired and wanted to go to bed, didn't he sit up and watch that fuck film channel?"

Yes.

"It's all adding up, isn't it?"

Reluctantly, she agreed. Yes, it was.

"Would a *Christian* watch such a channel?"

No. Not the way Sam does.

"Then perhaps—"

The silent voice faded, leaving the rest of it to Nydia's fertile imagination.

Nydia alternately felt like crying, screaming, jumping up and down, and, the thought came screaming into her brain: making it with another man.

Sure, why not? Sam has been sleeping around, so why the hell not? What was that old saying?

"What's good for the goose is good for the gander," the dark voice whispered obscenely.

She would just, by God, give that some thought; some serious thought.

She gave no thought to what was taking place around her, in the small town of Logandale. All that had been blocked by the dark forces. And they urged her on.

She wrote Sam a short note, telling him that she was going for a drive and might not be back for some time. Little Sam would be at Janet's.

"Let him stew about that for awhile," she muttered. "He's probably out screwing somebody right this minute."

She dressed Little Sam, put a change into a small bag, and locked up the house. Her eyes were flashing angry sparks as she pulled out of the drive and headed into town.

"So Jon Le Moyne and I are having an affair, are we?" she muttered. "Well, we'll just see about that."

And the demons and witches and warlocks and creatures who worship the Dark Prince howled with laughter.

Father Le Moyne pulled over to the curb and looked at the pastor of

the Methodist church. The man was sitting on the steps of his church, a confused and dejected look on his face.

"Come on," the priest said to Noah. "Let's find out what's wrong."

"You know what's wrong."

"Let's be certain." They walked over to the man, Father Le Moyne asking, "What's wrong, Byron?"

Byron Price, the minister, looked at the two men. "I—am troubled, Daniel. And I feel a little bit lost. Confused. What is happening? My entire congregation seems to be boycotting me."

"Well, Byron, don't feel like a lost sheep. Richard Hasseling over at First Baptist just told us the same thing, in almost the same words."

Methodist eyes met Catholic eyes. "And how about you, Daniel?"

"The same thing. No one came to mass. Not one person."

"What's happening, Daniel?"

Father Le Moyne hedged that for a moment. "John Morton at the Episcopal church told us," he indicated Noah, "not more than ten minutes ago, that he spoke by phone with several of his older members—elderly. They told him they had been bullied into not attending church this morning. Some of them had actually been physically shoved around, and worse."

A slamming door caused all eyes to turn to the house beside the church. An attractive woman was leaving the home, walking toward a car parked by the curb.

"My wife," the minister said glumly. "She's leaving me. Taking up with a seventeen-year-old boy. The Johnson boy. Seems she's been having an affair with him for several months. Maybe longer than that. Just came right out last night and told me all about it. Said—this is shameful and embarrassing—she said he had staying power in the sack."

"I beg your pardon?" Father Le Moyne said.

"He can fuck for a long time," Noah told him bluntly.

"Great scott, Noah!" Le Moyne looked at his friend. "How crude."

Byron Price put his face in his hands and openly wept. Father Le Moyne and Noah could do nothing for the man except feel pity for him. Byron was a good and decent man, who worked hard at his faith. He deserved better than this. But both men knew what had caused the breakup.

Mrs. Price rode by the three men in front of the church. She said something to the young man and they both laughed. The Johnson boy looked at the trio of men and extended his middle finger to them.

Noah reached for the pistol in his belt. Father Le Moyne's hand stopped him.

"Not that, Noah! Not yet. They've got to make some overt move first. They have to put us into some life-threatening situation. Only

then can we use force. You should know that far better than I."

Byron raised a tear-stained face to the priest. "Daniel, what in the world are you talking about? You're confusing me even more."

"Go to your parsonage, Byron," Father Le Moyne told him. "Pack several changes of clothing. Get your personal things together. Come with us. And Byron—if you have a gun—get it."

"All right," Monty said. "I think it's coming out into the open now. They're trying to get us to leave town voluntarily. I think when they see we're not going to run, they'll attempt to run us out; scare us out. What I don't understand is why they decided to move so quickly with this. It all seems so abrupt."

"They haven't moved quickly," Sam said, and all eyes swung toward him. "I would bet this is an old coven. Perhaps one of the oldest. Don't ask me how I know that, I just sense it. I—no outsider really knows much about any given coven—the inner workings. But while it appears they move quickly, they actually have spent years getting set. And I'll bet Satan is here—personally."

Sam reiterated some of his experiences in and around Falcon House, in Canada.

The mighty voice had spoken to Sam several times, the words thundering in the young man's head. Just seconds after Sam and Nydia performed the marriage ceremony, by themselves, on themselves, the voice came to both of them.

Nydia had said, "I guess we're married, Sam."

"In whose eyes is the question?" the strong voice came to them.

Nydia was frightened. Sam calmed her. "What do you mean—whoever you are—"in whose eyes?"

But the voice was silent.

Nydia said, "I sensed his presence in our room this morning. Or I should say *some* one's presence."

"The voice speaks in riddles," Sam warned her. "So be prepared for a puzzle."

"Not this time, young people," the mighty voice boomed. "The hooved one has made his decision. You, young warrior, are marked for death. A special black mass has been called for tomorrow night. They will attempt to call out the forces of darkness. If they succeed, I will do battle with them. You will know at midnight tomorrow if their calling has been successful. If so, you must take your—wife and leave the house at once. Do not attempt to fight them alone. You both must run and hide in the timber. But a word of warning: You cannot travel past the set boundaries. You will know them, for they are easily seen. Remember, young warrior, your sole purpose is to destroy the tablet, if possible."

"What tablet?" Sam asked.

"The Devil's Tablet. It is here. Hidden."

"And if I destroy it, what happens?"

"I cannot answer that, for it has never been destroyed."

"Wonderful," Sam said sarcastically. "How will I know this tablet?"

"It will know you. For the tablet is evil, and you represent good."

"May I ask what might sound to you a foolish question?"

"Ask."

"Why me? And who are you?"

"That is two questions. Which do you want answered?"

"The first one."

"Because you are who you are."

"Thank you so very much. You've really cleared it all up."

Nydia touched his arm. "Sam! Don't be ugly to— him."

"You are—good," the voice thundered in their heads. "Both of you. Not perfect, but no mortal is. And I have made my decision: I shall help you."

The voice faded away, leaving the young couple sitting in silence in the timber of Canada.

"I talked with the voice several more times after that," Sam said. The small gathering in Monty's house could but stare in silence.

Finally Monty asked, "Who—what was the voice, Sam?"

"God's warrior, Michael."

Joe closed his eyes and gripped the arms of the chair tightly.

"You really talked with Michael?" Mille asked, her eyes wide.

Mille crossed herself. So did Monty, his wife looking at him strangely. Joe bowed his head. Whether he was praying or wondering if this was all a bad dream was up for grabs.

Take refuge! the words leaped into Sam's brain. Band together for safety! And be careful, for all is not as it appears!

"What's wrong, Sam?" Monty asked. "Your face seemed—strange." That damn word again, Monty thought. Well, it fits the situation.

"I think I just got a message from—far away," Sam told him, speaking to the entire group. "The same way I used to get them up at Falcon House."

"From the same—fellow?" Joe asked.

"I don't know. It could well be from my dad."

Viv was chewing on her lower lip and wringing her hands together.

"You got voices in your head?" Joe asked. "And they may be comin' from your dead father? Lordy, Lordy."

Sam smiled. "Yeah. I thought I was a candidate for the funny farm when I first heard them, up in Canada, three years ago. But I quickly learned to listen."

"What did the voice say to you, Sam?" Monty asked. His wife looked at him as if he was a fool.

"To band together. To be careful. All was not as it seems."

"I'll go along with that," Joe said. "Groupin' together might not be a bad idea. But first I'd kinda like to know what we're goin' up against 'fore I bunker myself in."

"That's me," Monty said. He looked at Mille. "Ginny been acting all right to you, Mille?"

"I can't see any difference. She never went to church anyway, so that wouldn't be any indicator of change in her."

"Sound her out, Mille," Sam told her. "If you think she's still—one of us." He stumbled on that. "You two stay close together until we can all meet and talk this out. By that time we should have firmed things up and know when and how to take a stand."

Viv slumped back on the couch and shook her head. "This is all a bad dream—a nightmare. It has to be. It *can't* be real. I'm going to wake up pretty soon and everything is going to be all right. Oh, God! Please let it be."

Monty went to her and took her in his arms. "It isn't a dream, babe. And you are awake. But we're going to make it. We're going to fight this thing and we're going to win it." He looked at Sam. "Aren't we, Sam?"

It was at that moment Sam realized they were all looking to him for leadership. Ex-Chief of Police Draper, Joe, Mille, Viv, all of them. And he knew, too, he did not want that job. Not again. He didn't know if he was up to it.

But you are, the voice boomed in his head. *You must. You have no choice in the matter.*

Sam met the gazes of the men and women gathered in the den. He sighed heavily, thinking: Here we go again, folks. Quit it, Sam, he berated himself. This is not the time for jokes. "Yes," the young man said. "If we stick together and don't lose our heads, we'll make it." Most of us, he thought, but did not put that into words. "But I won't lie to you. To any of you. It isn't going to be easy. The Devil and his followers will use every evil trick in their black book to get you all to join them. They will tempt you and entice with everything you can possibly think of. They will make it sound so appealing it will take all of your inner strength to combat it." He paused and said, "And—maybe some of you won't make it. It's that tough and tempting. I know, and so does Nydia. We went through it, and so did my dad. Nydia's stepfather raped her." He did not tell the group that Little Sam could well be a demon child. "Nydia's mother seduced me, and my seed produced, within her, a demon child. I do not know what sex or where the child is, but I strongly suspect the child—and it may not be

a child—it may be a full grown adult, in some form, is close by. The Devil's child is playing a vital part in all this." And I wonder if the tablet is near?

Yes!

I have to face that, too? Again? Sam projected the question.

Yes! came the silent reply. Sam could not identify the voice. He didn't think it was his father, but he couldn't be sure.

The young man looked into the eyes of the group. He read utter disbelief on the faces of the men and women. He knew it was too much for them to accept at one sitting. But he felt he did not have a choice in the matter. And there was so much he wasn't telling them.

"I know," Sam said. "I know. It's difficult for you to believe. But it is all very true and real, please believe me.

Monty stared at his shoes for a moment. He lifted his eyes. "Let's take this a day at a time, Sam. Let us—adjust, swallow all this. I don't doubt you—not for a minute—please. But Jesus God—this is storybook stuff; you see this at the movies, on TV. It—just doesn't, *can't* happen in real life."

"But it is happening," Sam told them. He stood up. "I'm going to prow! around town some, see what's happening. I'll check back with you all later."

"Be careful," Monty warned him.

Sam's smile was grim. "Don't you worry about that. I know what I'm up against. What we're up against. But you people have yet to discover the true horror of what is lying in wait for you."

"You could have talked all day and not said that," Joe mumbled.

There was no humor in Sam's reply. "Words alone cannot describe what is facing us all. You are days—perhaps only hours—away from getting a firsthand glimpse of all the horrors of hell."

"Lordy, Lordy," Joe said.

With a very stunned and badly shaken minister in the back seat of the automobile, Father Le Moyne and Noah pulled away from the minister's residence. "I'm sorry, gentlemen," Byron said from the back seat. "Even though I grew up on the streets of Buffalo, running wild as a buck, I have never fired a gun in my life."

"I took up skeet shooting about five years ago," Noah said. "I found it helped me to relax. Prior to that, I was a liberal's liberal: gun control, Save the Punks, abolish the death penalty—the entire nine yards. Then I did some serious soul-searching and found that most of my philosophy was unworkable in reality. I began plinking with a handgun. I found it great fun and just as relaxing as skeet shooting. If I ever again take part in any civil disobedience, it will probably be outside a prison somewhere, yelling for the warden to go ahead and

execute the bastard!"

Behind the wheel, Father Le Moyne fought to conceal his smile. "Noah, you've turned into a real tiger."

"I'm doing my best, Daniel. But it's rather difficult to inflict a serious bite with dentures." The writer laughed. He patted the butt of his .357. "One of these will almost always get a person's attention, though." He pointed to a crowd of men and women gathering on a street corner. "Look over there!"

"Shall we stop?" Le Moyne asked.

"Just drive by slowly," Noah said, not taking his eyes from the crowd. "Damn pack of rabble and trash."

The priest slowed the car. The writer and the men of God looked at the crowd. The mixed group returned the looks, glaring sullenly at the men in the car. One of the women arrogantly gave the trio the middle finger.

"Mrs. Baxter," Noah muttered. "Bitch used to teach Sunday School at the Lutheran church. I bet she taught them some trash, all right."

Someone in the crowd said something, the sound of the following laughter reaching the men in the car as they slowly drove past.

"I wonder what was said?" Father Le Moyne quietly asked.

"I doubt that you really want to know, Daniel," Noah told him. "For I imagine it was pure filth."

"Devil worship?" Byron spoke from the back seat. "Covens and witchcraft and the black arts? In Logan-dale. I just can't accept it, gentlemen. I just can't. Someone is playing tricks with you all. This simply *cannot* be occurring in this town."

Noah glanced back at the man. His eyes were glazed and the minister looked as though he might come unglued at any moment. Noah cut his eyes to Father Le Moyne, then back to Byron.

"Byron?" the priest said. "This has been a very trying and traumatic day for you. Why don't you rest for a few moments? Just put your head back, close your eyes, and rest. It will do you good."

"Don't you dare patronize me, Daniel!" the Methodist snapped back. "I am not a child."

"I know you're not a child, Byron. And I did not mean to patronize you. I apologize for my tone. It's just that you do not know what you are—what we are—facing in this town today."

"What happened between my wife and I has nothing to do with black magic. And this Sunday was merely a fluke of some sort," the minister stated flatly, his tone revealing his unyielding attitude on the matter. "I do not believe in the black arts. While there very well may be a gathering—a coven, if you will, in this town, of misguided men and women, I refuse to accept the premise of the Devil's actually being in Logandale. The mere thought is ludicrous."

Noah cut his eyes to the priest. The writer arched an eyebrow and sighed. "I hope you are an open-minded person, Byron. For you are about to be rudely slapped across the face by reality."

"Nonsense!"

"Byron," Father Le Moyne spoke softly. "Are you disputing the written word that in Luke the Devil claims authority over all the world?"

"Not at all, Daniel. But if I am to take that literally, then I would have to accept the premise of the individual's laying on of hands to heal, as well. Luke 4:40, I believe."

The priest smiled. "Are you saying that Jesus did not heal those with divers diseases?"

"That is not what I meant, Daniel," the Methodist defended his position. "And you know it."

"I know, Byron. Byron, we could talk of Satan's seeking man's destruction—in Peter. We could discuss Satan's tempting man to disobedience—Genesis. We—"

"Yes, Daniel," the minister cut him off. "I know all that. That Satan blinds the unbelievers. That he incites men to evil. That he appears as the Angel of Light. That he delights in misusing the scriptures. I am very much aware of all that. The Good Lord knows you and I have spent many a night debating all that—and more. But I do not believe in demonic possession, black magic, exorcism, witches, warlocks, things that go bump in the night, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster—none of that. I am telling you both, before you race about town, making utter fools of yourselves, that today was only a fluke, and nothing more."

"Like John, Byron, I feel you are about to witness something that will awe you."

"Nonsense!"

FOUR

Worried about Little Sam and Nydia, plagued by a guilty conscience, and wanting to tell Nydia what had happened the previous night, Sam returned home. He found the note.

"Gone for a drive!" Sam said, his voice echoing around the empty house. He couldn't believe it. Of all the people in Logandale, Nydia should have known how much danger they were facing. And she calmly goes out for a drive. He shook his head in disgust and mounting anger.

The dark forces began working at him, silently, invisible, insidiously.

His anger mounted. "All right," he said hotly. "If that's the way she

wants to play the game, then two can play as well as one."

Sam stood for a moment in the den, looking at the chair where Janet had straddled him, taking his hardness into her hot young depths. He vividly recalled the scene: her firm breasts, jutting nipples, and soft skin. He replayed in his mind her tongue probing his lips and mouth. He recalled her hands on him.

He shook his head, attempting to clear them of those scenes. He found he could not.

"Well, it won't happen again," he muttered. "I made a mistake, and I'm going to catch hell for it." He laughed ruefully. "More truth in that than I might think."

Then the dark forces entered his mind. Their good friend at Nelson, Xaviere Flaubert. Sam had picked up vibes from her more than once. He felt she was ready for a brief fling ... with him. Hell, why not? She was tall and well-built, with soft, long brown hair, lovely gray eyes. And the new girl in town, Desiree Lemieux. Both young women were gorgeous, beautiful. For a moment, Sam allowed himself the pleasure of mental eroticism, wondering how they would look naked.

He experienced such a heady feeling of lust he had to clench his big hands into fists and shake himself like a dog to clear his mind.

The forces slipped away and Sam was left with no conscious memory of what he had been thinking. But it was firmly implanted in his subconscious. And it would return ... with a vengeance.

He went to his gun cabinet and took out his .41 mag, checking to see if it was fully loaded. It was. He slipped a handful of cartridges into his jacket pocket and left the house, carefully locking the front door. He looked in the glove box of his pickup. The .38 Chiefs Special was in leather, fully loaded. Sam, like his father whom he had never known, paid very little attention to current gun laws. Like so many law-abiding Americans, Sam believed he had a right to own one gun, or one hundred guns, if that is what he wished. And it was no business of the government, or of anyone else, how many guns he owned. Like his father, Sam was a conservative in much of his thinking.

Sam drove aimlessly through the small town, not liking the feeling that slowly crept over him as he drove. The Dark One was here, very close. Sam had no doubts about that. The feeling was too strong. And it was the same feeling he had experienced up in Canada, at Falcon House.

As he drove the nearly deserted streets, he noticed someone had thrown something through a window of the First Baptist Church, shattering the stained glass.

"It's begun," Sam muttered. "They have started. The campaign of terror will intensify." And with a sinking feeling, he knew the helpless elderly would be the first to suffer.

The very young and the very old, Sam mused. Always the ones caught in the middle.

A teenager—Sam guessed him to be about fifteen—shot looks of hate at Sam as he drove slowly past the boy. A hard feeling of dejavu struck Sam, hitting him with such force he pulled off the road at the first intersection and parked by the curb. He put his forehead on the steering wheel as his mind catapulted back in time.

Sam viewed three men in an old pickup truck. He knew the town he was seeing. Whitfield. And there was Wade Thomas and a man he didn't know in the cab of the truck. Sam's father was behind the wheel.

Sam felt his spiritual embodiment pulled closer and closer to the slowly moving pickup. God, but my dad was a big one, Sam thought. Look at the arms and shoulders on him.

Time gripped the young man in firm hands and held him in silent invisible space. He could hear his father and the other men talking, and could, somehow, know what they were thinking. He was there, flung back in time.

In front of the drive-in, the county road was blocked by milling teenagers and their cars and trucks. The three men in the pickup truck watched as a young man openly and carelessly caressed the buttocks of a teenage girl. The young man cupped both cheeks of her denim-clad buttocks. The girl giggled obscenely, rubbing against his crotch.

"The preacher's daughter," Wade said. "Margaret Farben."

"Yes," Sam replied. He cut his eyes. "Look at that."

A teenage boy had a teenage girl backed up against a car, her Levi-clad legs spread wide, the boy between them, hunching, crotch to crotch.

"I believe," Sam said dryly, "if memory serves me correctly, we used to call that dry-fucking."

"Sam!" Wade was shocked. He knew his preacher was a maverick—everybody knew that. But not this much a maverick.

"Pardon my bluntness," the minister said. "But what would you call it?"

Wade shook his head. A light, airy sensation had overtaken him at the sight of all this sexual display. He experienced a slight erection. He could not clear his head.

"Sam!" Wade shouted.

"Steady, Wade," the minister cautioned him. "Fight it. All this is being staged for us. It's set up by Satan. Fight it."

"Let's try to get through them without trouble," Chester said.

Then that would be Chester Stokes, young Sam thought through time and mist. My father's good friend. Dad had finally been forced to

kill Mr. Stokes after the man had become one of the undead. (The Devil's Kiss)

But how do I know all this? And why is this happening to me? And what is the point—the message here?

Sam drifted, his mind's eyes absorbing the scenes of years past.

The young people would not let the men through.

Their profanity was shocking. They shouted things at the men Wade would not have believed had he not been present.

Chester merely shook his head in disgust.

"Mother-fucker!" a boy shouted at the men.

A girl, perhaps fifteen, at most, leaned against the truck. She winked at Sam. She smelled bad. "Want some pussy, preacher?" She opened her shirt, exposing braless breasts to him.

Sam averted his eyes, looking straight ahead. Suddenly, as if on some silent cue, the crowd of young people parted. The road was empty, the kids returning to the drive-in. A car, bearing out-of-state plates drove slowly down the road.

"They know," the minister muttered. "I don't know how they do, but somehow all of them knew that car wasn't local."

"Sam! Let's stop the car and tell the people what's happening."

"No," Sam told Wade. "Do you want more innocent people to die?"

"No," the newspaper owner whispered.

"Then just calm down. I want to see what the kids do after this car passes."

When the vehicle passed and was out of sight, the young people once more blocked the road.

"Silent signals," Sam said. "From the Devil."

"If we let him," Chester said, "the Devil, I mean, or those working with him, they have the power to cloud our minds, right?"

"That's it," Sam replied.

Young Sam was returned to the present with shocking force. He looked around him. This was not Whitfield. It was Logandale.

Sam was bathed in sweat. His hands trembled. He willed them to cease their trembling.

"Dad," he whispered. "Are you here with me? Now? What are you trying to tell me? Show me? I know it's you, Dad. Tell me!"

But only silence greeted his questions.

He dropped the truck into gear and pulled away from the curb. He was a very confused young man. Then his mind became once more clouded as forces took control. When he finally shook the clouds away, he was on the outskirts of town, near the Giddon House and Fox Estate. He slowed and gazed at the ominous-appearing stone structure known as the Giddon House. The stone fence surrounding the place was at least ten feet high, with spikes and barbed wire on

top of the fence. The gates were massive, looking to be made of thick steel.

Sam then experienced the hardest thrust of evil he had felt in three years. And it came from the Giddon House.

Sam drove on past the ending of the stone fence. He stopped when he saw Desiree Lemieux standing in the driveway of Fox Estate.

She waved at him and Sam backed up, rolling down the window on the passenger side.

"Desiree," he said with a smile. "Waiting for a bus?"

She looked confused for a moment, then laughed as she caught the joke. "No. After that horrible night last night, this day is so beautiful I wanted to go for a walk. I had just left the house. Where are you going? I'm sorry," she quickly added. "I did not mean to pry into your private affairs."

I'd like to have an affair with you, Sam thought. And it did not appear odd to him to be thinking in that manner.

Soft gray eyes touched Sam.

On the upper level of the mansion, Jimmy Perkins peeked through heavy drapes, watching the mistress of the house talk to Sam Balon. He was not afraid of her telling the young man of his presence. Everything had been arranged, set in motion by the Master.

"No apologies necessary, Desiree," Sam said. "I was just going for a drive. Would you like to come along?"

Those gray eyes once again touched him. Very intimately, Sam felt. He had heard all about these French women. He wondered if all or part of it was true.

"Won't your wife object? I can see you're wearing a wedding band."

Forces battled inside his head. The darker force soon became victorious. "No," Sam heard himself say. "Nydia won't mind." Hell, why should she? She's out doing ... something. Then the gossip came to him. Maybe she's doing it with somebody. The gossip. Where had he heard it? He couldn't recall. But it was something about his wife and that young Le Moyne boy. Sam could not know that Janet had planted the thought in his mind while he was making love to the teenager. Sam had heard all the stories about young Le Moyne and his being so well-endowed that about half the women in Logandale were panting after him. But Jon, or so the story went, was supposed to be so religious.

Hell, Sam thought, if he's any better endowed than I am, he's doing very well for himself.

So religious, the ugly thoughts once more entered the mind of the young man. Maybe he covers up the Bible when he fucks.

Sam hid a chuckle at the obscene thought. The sensing of evil from the Giddon House had left him. He did not know the reason for that

was because he was so close to the evil, the good in him was outweighed when the darker forces were worked so intensely.

"In that case," Desiree said, "I would like to take a ride with you." She got in the truck and Sam pulled back onto the road. She said, "I haven't made any friends here in Logandale yet. It's—rather lonesome." She looked at the big .41 mag on the front seat, between them. She said nothing about it. But her eyes lingered long on the weapon.

"You won't be lonesome very long," Sam assured her. He smiled "Not after the men around here get a look at you, bet on it."

Desiree returned the smile. "You're very kind. I thank you for the compliment, Sam. But I don't date very much."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I find that men all have the same thing on their mind. I am not opposed to a man/woman relationship, but I would rather be the one doing the choosing. Do you find that odd, Sam?"

"No, not at all. I can understand that." He cut his eyes at her, thinking: So choose me and let's get it on, honey.

He shook his head, not understanding his thoughts lately.

Sam did not see Nydia pulling up to an intersection. He did not see her look of shock at seeing her husband with another woman. He was through the intersection before he pulled his eyes back to the road.

Nydia watched them drive past, heading out into the country. Black rage filled her, compounded—although Nydia, like Sam, did not realize the powers of the Dark One were responsible for it. Nydia was so angry she was trembling. She did not know who the young woman was, catching only a quick glimpse of her. But from Sam's description of Desiree Lemieux, and since they were coming from the direction of Fox Estate, Nydia was sure it was Desiree.

"You *bastard!*" Nydia cursed her husband. She gripped the steering wheel so hard her fingers ached. She forced herself into calmness. "All right," she muttered through clenched teeth. "That's just dandy. If that's the way he wants to behave, that's just fine with me."

"That's right," that whispering voice entered her mind. "He screws the teenager last night, the Frenchwoman today. And you sit about and mope. It doesn't have to be that way. You know where to go. He is waiting for you. Young, virile, handsome. Think what a coup it would be for you to teach a handsome young man all about sex; all the marvels of a man and a woman."

Nydia sat frozen at the intersection.

"Go on," the voice whispered. "Go on."

The voice faded from her mind. She returned to reality. She remembered nothing of the whispering voice. But her subconscious did. She turned toward town. Toward the street where Jon Le Moyne

lived. She followed dark silent directions as her anger grew.

Janet sat in her room, looking at Little Sam playing on the floor. He looked up at her, an unfamiliar light in his eyes.

Janet stared at him. Something was odd about the boy. Something she did not understand. He suddenly looked mean, almost vicious.

As quickly as the strange look appeared on the boy's face, it was gone. The child returned to its play.

"Odd," Janet murmured. "Very odd. Could it be that he is one of us?"

But no messages came to her. Nothing whispered in her head. No winds blew, containing any sign from her Master. Nothing.

She continued watching the little boy at play. She was restless, desiring some action. She wanted a man. Last night had only whetted her appetite. But she had her orders from the Master. And she knew she must obey. She was pacified with the knowledge that soon—very soon, hours, perhaps—she could be satisfied sexually by all the men she desired. Including, hopefully, Sam Balon ... again.

As he drove, Sam wondered how Desiree could be so unconcerned. How she could not somehow sense ... something strange going on in the town. And then all that was swept from his mind. He could not remember what he had been thinking of.

Then he remembered it was a Sunday and he asked, "Are you a Catholic, Desiree?"

"I am nothing," she replied. "Agnostic, if anything. My—parents," she seemed to stumble over that word, "do not attend church, so therefore I was not brought up in one."

"My father was a minister."

"So you attend church regularly."

"I'm afraid not, Desiree. I know I should, but I fell out of the habit."

"And you and Nydia have been married—"

"For three years." He didn't tell her they had performed the wedding ceremony themselves. "A very good marriage, I think."

She put a soft hand on his forearm. Her perfume drifted to him. "I would like for us to be friends, Sam. Close friends. I think you are the type of person a woman could talk with. And I'd like very much to meet Nydia."

"I believe you two would get along just great." About like a cobra and a mongoose, taking in her present mood. "I'll ask her to come over and chat with you. Maybe then we could all get together and chat."

Reality returned in a hot rush. What in the hell am I thinking of? Sam again shook his head, but he could not clear his head.

"That would be very nice," she replied. Was that a note of insincerity in her voice? Sam's head seemed a bit clearer now, as they drove further into the countryside.

"Where is Nydia this morning?" Desiree asked.

"I don't know," Sam replied honestly. "She left me a note saying she was going for a drive. She does that occasionally," he lied.

Why am I defending her with lies? he thought. Guilty conscience, maybe?

Then he could not remember why he had a guilty conscience.

"Umm," was Desiree's reply to that.

Sam's eyes picked up movement on the side of the road just up ahead. He slowed down. They were on the highway that linked with the county road to the ski lodge.

It had been two men, Sam was certain of that. But when he got to the point where he had watched them jump into the woods, they were no where in sight.

A highway marker sat in the middle of the road, blocking it from shoulder to shoulder. "Road Closed" the sign read. Sam pulled over and stopped.

"Why is this road closed?" Desiree asked.

"I don't know. I thought I saw some men up here just a second ago, but they're gone." He got out of the truck and walked up to the sign. Desiree followed him. The road was sealed tight. No way for any type of vehicle to enter or leave on this section of highway.

Sam's mind cleared enough for logic to prevail. This is a county road, he thought. Until the lodge opens when the snow comes, there wouldn't be much traffic on this road, so its closing wouldn't inconvenience a great many people. But it was a way out that had been blocked. But in his present mental state, it was difficult for him to bring to mind the full scope of the situation and why it was important for this road to remain open.

He turned and bumped into Desiree. She stumbled and grabbed at his arm for support. For a long, soft moment she was pressing against him, both of them obviously enjoying the encounter, and wishing to retain it for as long as possible.

Sam looked down into pale gray eyes set in a heart-shaped face. Very smooth, unblemished skin, very soft-looking lips. It was a moment that was inevitable, considering the moment and the mood.

Their lips met in a kiss that both wanted.

For a young lady that avoided men because they all had only one thing on their mind, she responded with a passion that took Sam by surprise.

She could feel his maleness pressing against her, and Sam could feel the heat from her pressing against him. He moved against her and she responded, moving her hips, grinding them hard against him. His hand slipped down to her buttocks, caressing the softness.

Her tongue probed his mouth and her hands softly crawled over

him, gripping the hard muscles of his arms and shoulders.

"Well, now," a voice from the road ditch broke them breathlessly apart. "Ain't this cute?"

Sam jerked away from Desiree and was conscious of her hot breath on his face. She was breathing hard, her breasts rising and falling from the heat of the moment past. Three men stood between the timber and the road. One standing in the ditch, two just behind him, on the downward slope facing the road. Sam knew their faces but not their names. He did recognize the types, however. Every community has them: borderline thugs; almost outlaws; always standing on the ragged edge of lawlessness, ready to do anything evil and ugly and nasty.

"Getting your hands full of young stuff, huh, Balon?" one of them asked with a lewd grin.

"Get in the truck," Sam whispered to Desiree. "Go on, do it."

She slipped away and walked quickly to the truck, a strange look in her eyes. Sam said nothing to the men until Desiree was safely inside the cab. Only then did he turn to the trio of men.

Sam was approaching his twenty-fifth birthday, a senior at Nelson College. But from age seventeen to twenty-one, Sam had been a member of the U.S. Army's elite Rangers. The Rangers, founded in 1756, is one of, if not the oldest unit in the history of America. And not much is made public about them. Especially a tiny, very select group within them, made up of men from all services. Sam had been part of that unit.

Sam, even before the combat at Falcon House, was not a stranger to blood and killing. He had been assigned three kills during his tenure with a small force of men—and a few women—known as Dog Teams, unknown even to the most active military personnel, and had completed each mission. He was a skilled member of the martial arts community, and could kick as high as a ballet dancer—but with a much more lethal effect.

Right now, Sam was wondering how the man knew his name. And more importantly, why. "You figure that's any of your business, pus-gut?" Sam asked, some clarity returning to him, the adrenalin overriding the murkiness in his brain.

The spokesman for the trio, a man who looked to be in his late thirties or early forties, flushed at Sam's challenging and insulting question. He was a burly man, with thick arms, padded with muscles, heavy shoulders, and a barrel chest. He also had a beer belly hanging over his belt buckle. He said, "You just about a smart-ass, ain't you, punk?"

Autumn colors were beginning to paint the land. The timber behind the men shone in spots like burnished copper. Birches dotted the timber, and the needles of the tamaracks were drooping downward.

Small junipers, red cedars, maple and beech were in abundance. Stalks of goldenrod stood in the open spaces. It was the beginning of a beautiful season near the park.

"I've been known to speak my mind," Sam replied. There was no backup in the young man. He had proved himself, to himself, too many times to be in the least bit timid.

The man balled his hands into fists.

"Not yet, Mack," the man to his right said. "Not yet. "It isn't time."

The burly man relaxed. He grinned at Sam. His teeth were yellow, with several missing, leaving black gaps in his mouth. "O.K., boy," he said. "You can go pat your young pussy some more. You're off the hook—for awhile."

The trio wheeled about and quickly disappeared into the timber. They moved swiftly and silently among the brush, and Sam knew they were all expert woodsmen. He tucked that thought back into his mind for storage.

Sam walked back to his truck, backed up and turned around, heading back to town.

"What in the world was that all about?" Desiree asked. "Those men frightened me."

Sam glanced at her. She did indeed appear to be frightened. Her face was pale.

"I don't know, Desiree," he replied, the clouds once more gathering in his mind, slowing reason. "Local roughnecks, I guess. Looking for a laugh at someone else's expense. You find them all over the country. Down in our Southern states, law-abiding people call them trash. I'm not so certain that isn't an apt description of them."

She slowly nodded her head in agreement. "What did they mean: 'You're off the hook—for awhile?' What's going on in this town, Sam?"

Sam fought to clear his head, and succeeded for a moment. He could not for the life of him recall how he came to be with Desiree. He remembered kissing her, holding her, but could not understand why he did those things. He could remember nothing about Janet. He shook his head.

"Are you all right, Sam?"

"I don't know," he replied honestly. "I wish I knew."

"Turn here," the dark voice whispered in Nydia's brain. "It's all right. You are doing the correct thing, and you know it."

"Yes," she muttered.

She turned down the street where Jon Le Moyne lived. Something ... odd seemed to be in possession of her mental and physical functions. Or at least that part of her she inherited from her mother. Any doubts as to the wrongfulness of what she was doing were blown

away, leaving her mind under the lightless throes of the evil that clung invisibly about her.

She slowed when she saw Jon sitting on the front steps of his house. She pulled over to the curb and cut the engine. It was very quiet in this part of town. She could see no one. But they were watching her from the shaded windows of homes. She looked at Jon. He was a very handsome young man.

As if by magic—which it was, of the darker type—Nydia viewed the clear picture of Sam and Desiree leaping into her mind, and the old rage became fresh, stronger than ever before.

"Go to him," the voice whispered.

Still Nydia hesitated, the good within her battling the evil.

Jon sat on the porch, looking at the woman he had erotically shared so many nights and dreams with. Soon he would be touching her skin, gently cupping the breasts he had passionately kissed in his fevered imagination. He would be feeling her hands on him. The coven leader had told him last night Nydia would be coming to him. Jon had not thought that possible, but did not question the Leader.

Now she was here.

Nydia's hands gripped the steering wheel as more powerful, darker forces entered her mind, the forces bringing with them the actual scenes of Sam and Desiree standing by the road, embracing, kissing, touching, grinding against each other. She watched as Sam's hand slipped down the young woman's waist to caress her buttocks.

"You *bastard!*" she hissed.

And Evil defeated Good once more.

The vision faded. Nydia got out of the car and walked up toward the boy. He stood up and opened the screen door to the porch. She hesitated for only a few seconds, then stepped inside the door. The door closed behind her.

"No!" the voice spoke like thunder. "We interfered once before. This time they *must* combat the Dark One by themselves."

The ageless warrior of warriors looked at his God.

"They are mortals fighting forces they cannot understand or reckon with."

"*They understand!*" the voice roared, echoing throughout the firmament. "They have only to open the pages of their Bible and *read it!* It is all there for them to learn."

"They don't have the time."

"How much time does it take to read, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before *me!*'"

The warrior gripped his sword. He turned to leave.

"I forbid your leaving the firmament."

A smile played across the mighty warrior's lips. His beard moved as he spoke. "What would You have done with me, then? Banishment?"

"You would not be the first," the warrior was reminded. "But banishment was your choice of punishment, not mine."

"You will consider the problem?"

"Don't I always?"

"Sometimes for eons." The warrior's reply was dry as the pits of hell are hot.

"Michael, old warrior friend, not everything can be solved by the sword."

"Would You prefer the jawbone of an ass?"

The returning sigh was as thunder rolling across the heavens. "Sometimes I wonder why I continue to tolerate such impudence."

"Because absolute power corrupts!" the warrior said with a laugh that roared and rumbled like a hurricane.

He could not suppress the chuckle. "Leave me for a time; I will consider your request."

"I knew You would."

And the heavens were silent.

FIVE

Sam cleared his head for a time—something cleared it—and drove past his house, intending to take Desiree in to meet Nydia. But his wife's car was still gone. For a reason the young man could not fathom, that irritated him, rubbed his ability to reason down to raw nerve ends. He ground his teeth together and silently swore. He was conscious of Desiree looking at him, a curious look in her eyes.

The young woman proved her astuteness when she said, "Sam, if you and your wife are having troubles of some sort, being with me is the last thing you need at this time."

Sam went on the defensive—with a little unknown help. "What I do, Desiree, is my business. Besides, there are—certain things you don't know; no way you could know about them. Perhaps this is the time to—" He went blank. He could not remember what he was about to say. He blinked, then met her gaze. "What was I just saying?"

She returned the blink and added a smile. "It was nothing, Sam. Don't worry about it."

"O.K. Let's drive a bit more."

"I am with you, Sam."

They began circling the town, the anger steadily growing in Sam. She just dumped the boy and took off, he thought. She knew where I was going; I told her that last night after going to bed. But she chooses not to tell me a goddamn thing. Hell with her.

"Perhaps she is with her lover," a voice whispered in Sam's brain.

Yeah, Sam thought. Maybe.

"Perhaps she is searching for the ultimate orgasm. Didn't she once tell you that she liked a teeny bit of pain mixed in with her pleasures?"

Did Nydia say that? Sam pondered. Yeah, I guess she did. But he couldn't remember when.

"Jon Le Moyne would certainly give her just a teeny bit of pain with the pleasure."

The voice faded.

There was that name again. It was coming up with too much frequency not to have some truth behind it.

He looked to his right at an intersection and stomped on the brakes so hard the rear tires sang against the pavement.

"Sam!" Desiree protested. "What is it? What's wrong?" She fell back against the seat.

Sam expelled a long breath. He looked at Desiree. "I guess the stories are true after all. That just about confirms it in my mind. That's my wife's car parked right over there, on the left side of the street."

"All right. So she's visiting a friend. What is so wrong about that?"

"That *friend* is a high school student. A junior, I think." How did I know that? "A boy. But a young boy so well-equipped in the manhood department a lot of * women in this community would give anything to bed him down—so the stories go. I've heard stories, rumors, gossip, about my wife and Jon Le Moyne. Lot of stories." But he could not recall the source of a single story. That thought quickly left him. It was replaced just as quickly by hot anger and a feeling for revenge. His time with Janet was something that had been, for the time, blocked from him.

"Well," Desiree said. "I see. She must be quite brazen to park her car in front of her lover's house in broad daylight. My people are a bit more discreet than that. Perhaps she doesn't care if you find them out, oui?"

Sam opened his mouth to tell her that perhaps Nydia was under the control of the Devil, but that was wiped from his mind before it could transmit to his tongue.

Sam said, "Well if she doesn't care, then I damn sure don't. Can you blame me for that?"

"*A quelque chose malheur est bon*," Desiree said with a smile and a mischievous sparkle in her gray eyes.

"I used to speak fair French, but not anymore. What did you say?"

"That it was an ill wind that blows no good. For somebody," she added in English.

"Yes," Sam replied, returning the smile. A thought came to him. By

God, he'd show Nydia. "Fox Estate must be beautiful. I've heard a lot about it. Would you show it to me?"

Enchanté, Sam."

They had gathered at Monty and Viv Draper's home. Noah Crisp, Father Le Moyne, Byron Price, Joe Bennett, Mille LaMeade, and her friend, Ginny. They were joined by the minister of the Baptist church, Richard Hasseling, and John Morton of the Episcopal church. John Morton's wife was at home, and Hasseling was a young bachelor.

Monty listened to the phone ring on the other end of the line for the tenth time. For the tenth time he hung up. "I don't know where they are," he said. "This is not like Sam." He paused. "Now, why did I say that? I scarcely know him."

Hasseling waved a hand impatiently. "No matter, Chief Draper. What does matter at this time is the frame of mind you people appear to be in. I'm worried about you all. The *Devil* is in Logandale? *Satan* is responsible for the lack of church attendance today? Really, people!" He fought unsuccessfully to hide his smile and to keep his contempt out of his tone. "Come on, all of you. This is just a very elaborate joke on your part that fell flat."

The Episcopal's opinion of what he had just heard was not much better than the Baptist's. "I'll admit, Daniel, I'm concerned about what happened today, or perhaps I should say what didn't happen on this day. But I am not yet ready to say the Devil is alive and well and living in Logandale."

"It's all nonsense and we are wasting our time here," the Methodist said. "I cannot believe I have sat here and actually listened to all this."

"You all had best take this seriously," Noah informed the ministers. "For I assure you all, this is not a joke. Please believe me."

The pastor of the Fundamentalist church, the Pentecost church, the Assembly of God church, and several others were all seen by Father Le Moyne and Noah. One had slammed the door in their faces, another had been quite rude, and the others had openly laughed at the men.

The Episcopalian vacillated for a moment. "All right, Daniel. I'll stay and hear this out," he finally said. "I have to admit my children are—have been—behaving a bit strangely."

That word again, Monty thought. It keeps popping up every hour or so.

"If you people are so certain Satan is in Logandale," Hasseling said, this time making no attempt to hide his smile, "and there is a coven active in this town, this community, why don't you call the state police and let them handle it?" The young minister leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. His smile was more than a bit on the smug side.

The self-satisfied smile was infuriating to Noah. The writer resisted an urge to get up, walk over to the preacher, and slap the piss out of him.

Here we go again, Mille thought, as she looked at Monty. She could tell he was getting angry.

"Because they wouldn't believe us," Monty said. "We have no proof."

"And you never will have any proof," Hasseling said. "Because there isn't any proof. All this is a figment of your overactive imaginations." He laughed aloud.

Noah leaned forward and shocked everybody in the room by saying, "Preacher, when those coven members out there," he said and jerked his thumb, "successfully take over this town—and they will, if we don't band together and fight them, and bend you over a table and shove a ten inch cock up your ass, maybe then you'll believe us."

"Whooo!" Mille said with a laugh. "That'd be a sight to see."

"Noah!" Father Le Moyne said.

Viv had to fight to hide a smile.

"Lordy!" Joe said.

Hasseling's face grew red and he was about to respond when something came shattering through the picture window of the den. The heavy object bounced on the floor, leaving a wet red smear as it slid to a halt at Richard Hasseling's feet. Richard took one look at the horrible thing and vomited up his breakfast.

There would be no turning back for her now. She was under the full power of the Dark One. Standing this close to evil, Nydia could but obey the messages her brain was receiving from the forces that gleefully guided her actions.

She could function, she could ask questions, but she had no control over her actions. "Where are your parents, Jon?"

"Syracuse," the young man said. He reached out and ran his hand down the side of her face, caressing the softness of her throat. He hesitantly fondled a breast. When she did not draw away from his touch, he pressed both hands to her breasts. "They were coming back today, but I just got a call from the state police telling me they were killed in a car accident early this morning."

Part of her mind registered shock at the matter-of-fact manner he related and was responding to the death of his parents. But that small part of her mind was being overridden by the evil transmitted to her. "Your father is the priest's brother? Father Le Moyne?"

"Yeah," the young man said. He unbuttoned her blouse and licked his lips at the sight of her bra. He touched the soft flesh of her.

"Have you notified Father Le Moyne?"

"Naw. Who gives a shit? The bodies will be here late this afternoon

anyways. Then he'll get a chance to see them tonight." Jon giggled. "And I mean *really* see them. You know what I mean?"

That small part of her mind that still functioned under her control recoiled at what she knew he was saying. His parents were now a part of the living dead. The undead. And the boy thought it funny. Again, that part of her mind was overridden by the dark forces. She stood passively as he slipped her blouse from her shoulders and dropped the garment to the floor. She felt coolness on bare skin. His hands caressed her, found the clasp to her bra, and that followed her blouse to the floor. Her breasts swung free.

Jon touched one nipple with a trembling fingertip. The nipple swelled. "Take off the rest of your clothes, Nydia," he told her.

She undressed and stood naked before him.

Jon ran his hands over her body, inspecting, exploring. The dark voices instructed her to respond, and she did, becoming as aroused as the boy.

He jerked his clothing from him, buttons flying and bouncing around the room. He stood naked before her, and she could not take her eyes from his hardness.

"We're going to have fun today, Nydia," he told her. "We're going to fuck away the afternoon. Just the two of us, doing things we've both dreamed of."

"All right," she heard herself say.

"Get down on your knees in front of me. You know what to do."

She knelt down on the carpet and lifted her eyes to meet his.

"Lick it," he told her.

An invisible barrier was being erected around Logandale. Extending for ten miles in any direction, the line could not be seen by the naked eye or felt by any human not confined within its barriers. But it was as real as Heaven and Hell.

The nonbelievers in Logandale, those not committed to the practices of the black arts, were trapped. There were only two ways out: accept the Dark One as a master—or die.

Out-of-town motorists driving through the barrier could not detect the line of evil. But they would not stop within the ten miles the system spanned, encircling the designated area of control. Logandale and Nelson College were slowly being cut off from the outside world. Good would soon be replaced by Evil. *If* all went as the Prince of Darkness planned; *if* his orders were carried out by his followers as he dictated; *if* God or his warrior did not intervene ... then for the first time in the history of the United States, one entire community would be under the powers of the Prince of Hell. The Lord of Flies. Master of Darkness and Evil.

If all went as planned.

It looked good to the leader of the coven and his council. The daughter of the Prince was here, and the Princess would soon make her move against Sam Balon. Very soon, young Mr. Balon would no longer be any threat. Very soon.

The object that had shattered its way into the den of the Draper house, and into the lives of the people gathered there had, in its living form, been a poodle. It now resembled, at best, something out of a horror movie. The little animal had been skinned and its belly sliced open. When it was hurled through the window, its intestines and other organs were sprayed all over the room. Joe found the heart and liver in his lap. He yelled and threw the bloody objects off him.

Byron Price looked down at the floor. A gray pile of intestines lay by his feet.

John Morton stared in undisguised revulsion at the red smear of blood on the floor.

Viv and Mille both held back screams, checking the outrage in their throats.

Monty Draper cursed.

Father Le Moyne crossed himself while Noah fought back sickness that gathered hotly in his stomach, threatening to boil from his mouth.

Ginny sat in numbed shock.

And Richard Hasseling puked on his shoes.

"It's begun," Father Le Moyne said. "We failed to heed the warnings. Now it's begun. And it may be too late for any of us."

"No!" Hasseling screamed, jumping from his chair. "It's a filthy game of some sort."

"It's filthy, all right," Noah told him. "But as I tried to tell you before, this is no game. Now maybe you'll pull your head out of your ass and wise up."

"Don't you *dare* speak to me in that manner!" the minister shouted at the writer.

Noah adjusted his beret. "Oh—stuff it, you prissy prig."

"Gentlemen," Monty said wearily. "We don't need to fight among ourselves. We—"

Mille began screaming, pointing to the hallway. A foul odor filled the den.

Something about Fox Estate reminded Sam of Falcon House. Perhaps it was its hugeness. He didn't know. But something about it ...

Then all thoughts of Falcon House were wiped from his mind. Sam was frozen in time as Nydia entered his mind. His wife was standing nude in a bedroom, a young man facing her. He was naked, his

erection jutting out from his lean body. Sam watched Nydia take the erection in her hands and caress it. The young man fondled her breasts. One hand left her breasts and lingered between her legs.

The scene faded from Sam's mind, leaving wild, hot anger in its place. He clenched his hands into fists and wanted to strike out at something.

"Not strike to cause physical pain," a voice entered his head. "But there is a way to seek revenge for her unfaithfulness."

Sam listened as the voice gave him instructions. He smiled his satisfaction.

"Yes," Sam murmured. "That's what I'll do."

He was left with no conscious memory of the voice or the instructions.

Sam turned at Desiree's footsteps behind him. She was carrying a silver service, a pot of coffee on the tray. She smiled at him and said, "Let's sit over by the window. The view is so nice from there."

A lot better than what I just viewed, Sam thought. He did not question how he was able to bring to his mind's eye the infidelity. Something nagged at him, but he was unable to pinpoint the cause.

"I apologize for what happened back there on the side of the road," Desiree said. "Something—something came over me. I don't know how to explain it. I've never experienced anything like it before."

"You don't have to apologize to me, Desiree. Truly, I enjoyed it."

"Truly," she said shyly, "so did I."

They drank their coffee and nibbled on small cookies in silence. They studiously avoided any eye contact until it became obvious to both of them they had best either play the hands they were dealt, or fold.

"Why are we behaving like this?" Desiree asked. "Something is the matter with me."

Sam struggled for full use of his senses. She watched the young man's face dot with sweat. She looked at him curiously. Sam gripped the small table's edges with his big hands.

"Desiree!" he blurted. "Can't you feel this—"

Sam could not finish the sentence. He could not remember what he was about to say. He knew only that he wanted the woman seated across from him.

Desiree smiled and put a small soft hand over his big hand. "I know what I felt back on the road's edge, when you kissed me. I know that I have been drawn—somehow, to you from the first day I saw you, at Nelson. And those feelings have grown stronger by the hour. I want you, Sam."

She rose from her chair and came to him, drawing his head to her breasts.

Sam gave up. He was weary of fighting something he could not understand; weary of combating his failing memory and forces that were beyond his present level of comprehension. He gratefully placed his head against the softness.

With her standing, and Sam seated, he let his hands drift from her waist to her buttocks. She sighed longingly as his hands gripped her buttocks. He rose to his feet and pulled her to him, kissing her open lips, feeling her tongue meet and explore his own.

Sam did not see Jimmy Perkins watching them from the outside, peering through the window. The ageless spawn of the Devil grinned grotesquely. It was all going as planned. The Master would be so pleased.

Jimmy hoped the young couple would perform the sex act where he would be able to watch them. Jimmy enjoyed watching people fuck. But that was not to be.

Desiree and Sam left the sitting room and disappeared into the depths of the huge mansion.

"Shit!" Jimmy said. He was disappointed, but not too much so. For the Master had promised him he could have his choice of any of the young local girls very soon. Jimmy could wait that long.

In an upstairs bedroom, clothing became tangled on the carpet and male flesh touched female flesh. Breathing became tense and hot and excited. Sam tongued the nipples of Desiree until they ached from passion. He slid his mouth lower, tracing patterns on her bare belly. His tongue explored the soul of the woman as she moaned under his mouth.

She breathed love words as she gripped his erection, heavy and hot under her fingers. She cried out in pain as he entered her. Blood dotted the sheets as he penetrated the maidenhead.

Passion overrode pain and she began meeting him lunge for stroke.

The day promised much for all concerned in Logandale. On both sides of the line separating the firmament from the nether world.

None were to be disappointed.

All whirled at the sounds of Mille's screaming. All were shocked into silence and momentarily frozen in place at the sight facing them from the hall.

It was a man, but a stranger to them all. The man was pale, whiter than any living human being any had ever seen. His clothing reeked of a foulness none were familiar with, and when he opened his mouth, his breath was that of a newly opened grave.

He shuffled up the hall toward the archway, his mouth open, his tongue a horrible sickly red color, his teeth fanged, his eyes wild with a fury no human could comprehend. No one except Noah Crisp and

Father Daniel Le Moyne.

The priest lunged to his feet, the large cross in his right hand. He rudely shoved Monty and Mille aside and stood in the dimly lit hallway. He held the cross up to Max Oberlin.

"Spawn of *Hell!*" he shouted at Max. "See this!" He thrust the cross at the undead.

Max screamed as if in intense physical pain, the breath from him fouling the close hallway, the stench drifting into the den. He shielded his eyes with his hands, deflecting the silver light from the cross of Christ.

Father Le Moyne rushed the undead, slamming into him, knocking the man backward. Max grabbed at the wall to keep from falling to the floor in the narrow hallway. The priest kicked at the living dead, hitting him on the leg. Max howled, not in pain but in confusion. Max stumbled from the hall and staggered into the kitchen, knocking chairs from the breakfast table in all directions. He lurched onto the back porch and tore the porch door from its hinges in his haste to escape the priest's rage and the hideous sight of that awful cross.

Father Le Moyne pursued him, shouting at the undead, raining down God's words on the creature. Monty grabbed the priest by the seat of the pants before he could get off the porch and hauled him back into the kitchen.

"Stay inside!" Monty yelled at the man.

Father Le Moyne calmed himself and nodded his head in agreement. "Yes. Yes, you're quite right, Chief. There is no telling what might be lurking outside in wait." He seemed confused for a moment. "But it's daylight; the sun is shining. I never knew those—things roamed about under God's sunlight."

Before Monty could reply, Richard Hasseling charged into the kitchen. "Do you have any idea what you're saying, Daniel? Have you any idea what you're implying?" He was screaming the questions. His face was pale and his hands were trembling. "That poor man was ill. Perhaps mentally deranged. But he wasn't a—a *vampire!* Good Lord, man—have you taken leave of your senses? Get a grip on yourself, Daniel. You people are carrying this joke just a bit too far!"

Catholic had taken just about all of Baptist he could safely tolerate. Le Moyne looked at Hasseling and said disgustedly, "Oh—stick it in your ear, Richard!"

SIX

Max ran from the house in fright and confusion. He did not care where he ran, just get away. The sight of the Cross had filled him with dread. And the bright sun was hurting his eyes. He did not know what

he was, where he was, and what had caused this change in him. He knew only that he must have blood to survive. The blood of an animal would not do. He must have fresh human blood. And have it quickly. He had awakened in the rear of an emergency unit, disoriented and weak. He could not remember his name, what he did for a living, or even where he lived. All he knew for sure was that he was caught between two worlds. And this was all there would ever be for him. How he knew that was now beyond his now rather limited sphere of comprehension; but he knew.

He ran down the small alley and ducked into the rear of a house. He slipped onto the back porch and looked inside. A man and a woman were in the kitchen, having a snack of pie and coffee.

"Gimmie another piece of this pie, Ann," the man said. "Stuffs almost good as pussy."

Ann laughed, cut him another piece of pie, and left the kitchen.

Ann was on the pudgy side, but still attractive. The man was grossly overweight. Heart attack candidate, Max thought, then wondered why he would think that.

The man's back was to Max. Max looked around and spotted a small axe leaning against the wall. He picked it up. He slipped into the kitchen, raised the hatchet over his head, and sank the bit into the man's head. The man died without making a sound. His face dropped with a plop into his second helping of pie. Apple. His brains splattered all over the table. Max knelt down and lapped at the blood from the man's shattered head. He spit out a bit of pie—that was distasteful to him—and continued lapping at the flow of blood.

He heard the woman returning and stepped quickly behind a door. Ann stepped into the kitchen, viewed the scene before her, wet her pants, then fainted without making a sound.

When she came to her senses, having been out for no more than a couple of minutes, she was naked on the kitchen floor, Max hunching between her wide spread legs, thrusting himself into her. Her neck was sore, and she thought she must have hurt it when she fell. She tried to fight the man raping her, but found his strength too much. She tried to scratch him, and that got her a brutal fist to the jaw. She dropped into darkness, not understanding why the man was saying, "It will be all right in a few minutes. You'll see. Then you will understand."

She fell into unconsciousness at the sound of him sucking at her neck.

When she returned to consciousness, she was very weak, scarcely able to move. Her arms and legs were cold, as if they had been drained of blood. She looked at the half naked man standing over her. She tried to call to him, to ask him for help. But the words would not

form on her tongue; her tongue felt swollen and thick.

Max laughed at her, a wild, insane light in his eyes. He picked up the small axe. She watched in horror as he laughed and brought the axe down on her chest. She could feel very little pain as he hacked at her. She closed her eyes.

Max hacked at the naked woman, chopping off one arm at the elbow and then whacking off one foot at the ankle. He mangled her chest and face. Max threw down the axe and pulled on his trousers. He found a pair of sunglasses and put them on. He felt much better as he left the house. He kept to the shadows, doing his best to stay out of direct sunlight.

After a few minutes, Ann stirred on the kitchen floor and crawled to her hands and knees. Two knees, one hand.

There was blood splattered all over the kitchen. But it was her husband's blood, not hers.

She pulled herself up and caught the edge of the stove for support and heaved herself up, holding onto the stove for balance. Half her face was missing, but most of her teeth were still in her face. Four of her teeth had changed in shape and size. She lurched around the kitchen, finding a hammer and some clothesline cord. She tied the hammer handle around her severed ankle. Ann lurched and banged and clumped about the house, knocking over tables and lamps. She thudded into a bedroom, found her housecoat, and covered her mangled nakedness. She looked out into the street and found the bright sunlight hurt her eyes.

She was weak and very thirsty, but decided she had best wait until night before leaving the house. She thudded and banged her way back to the kitchen and stood for a moment, looking at her dead husband. She felt no emotions. She craved blood. But she did not want to lap at his cold blood. She grinned hideously.

She wanted hot living blood.

Nydia looked at the exhausted sleeping boy sprawled naked on the bed. She silently slipped from his side. She dressed quietly and left the house. She knew she had done something very wrong, but despite the feeling, she could not completely shake off the lingering effects of the Dark One's grip.

Then she felt guilt wash over her in waves. She mentally fought the forces of evil, winning a small battle. Then the pleasures she had experienced with Jon overrode the small victory. She pulled away from the curb, aware of the many faces looking at her. A face seemed to fill each window of every house along the block. The eyes were of the darkest evil. Nydia shuddered as she felt the corruption touching her.

She won another battle as she fought off the staring eyes.

She wondered why she had come to Jon's house. It wasn't his skill as a lover. Other than a monster cock the boy knew nothing of lovemaking.

Something important was taking place in Logandale; something important was happening. But she couldn't recall what it was. She had to struggle to remember it was Sunday. And where was Little Sam. She couldn't remember. Oh, yes—at Janet's. She would go there and get him.

She shook her head. What was the matter with her?

Sam gently slipped from the bed. Desiree lay sprawled in sexually induced sleep.

Sam wanted to say something to her but didn't know what to say. What could he say? Thanks for a fantastic fuck?

A virgin. Desiree had been a virgin. Now that passion was sated that fact could astonish him. She had been a virgin.

He stood over her, looking at her nakedness. A beautiful woman. No doubt about that. And her resemblance to Xaviere was uncanny. Sam shook his head and dressed. He pulled a sheet over the sleeping woman and left the room, quietly closing the door. He felt a bit uneasy about leaving her alone in the great house ... but something nagged at him; told him to get away. He had something to do. But what? He couldn't remember. He slipped quietly down the curving stairway, out the front door, and into the sunlight.

There, guilt and shame struck his conscience with a hammer-blow.

Twice I have been unfaithful to my wife. I made love to another woman and this time I did so willingly.

"But your wife was enjoying the fruits of the young man, Jon Le Moyne," the dark whisper came to him. "She took him in her mouth and loved him in that manner."

Resolve filled Sam. He banged his fist on the fender of his truck. Full realization came to him, filling him with anger. He whirled around. "I don't care!" he shouted. "Damn you! Now I know what's been happening to me. Now I know what Dad was trying to tell me. How tricky you can be. How you can cloud minds and make wrong seem right. But it won't happen again, you scummy bastard. Now I can fight you. Now I know how. It *won't happen again!* Do you hear me, bastard?"

Something struck Sam in the chest, knocking him backward. He slammed against the concrete drive, the wind knocked from him. He struggled to his feet. He was slapped back to the driveway. He could hear laughter but could see no one.

"You tricked me," Sam pushed the words from his mouth. "Desiree is

one of yours."

"You are *all* mine!" the hot wind sighed. "Mine to do with as I see fit. To play with. I am going to enjoy this, young man. Fight me if you wish. But soon you will lose. I will see you nailed to a cross; hear you screaming for mercy. I will see your wife used; every orifice filled. And I will make you watch it all."

"You mother-fucker!" Sam yelled at the voice.

The laughter once more reached him. "There will be no interference this time, Balon. None. You few are on your own."

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Sam shouted. He got to his hands and knees and felt something like a giant foot kick him in the seat of his jeans, sending him sprawling.

The hot wind laughed in Sam's face, the foulness of the wind sickening. "Puny Christian. How dare you curse *me*!" The wind laughed arrogantly. "My people will use you as they see fit, Balon. Then they will destroy you—after you have begged my mercy and renounced your God. Let's make this a game, Balon. I will return your wits; to all of you. All participants. You are free to fight me. So fight me, pukey Christian."

Sam found he could not move. He was pinned in a helpless squat on the concrete. Hot stinking rain began to fall on him, the liquid foul-smelling. Sam squatted in helpless rage.

He was being pissed on.

Nydia's senses returned to her in a hot rush of clarity. She pulled off the road and parked on the curb. Tears ran from her eyes, the silver streams rolling down her cheeks. Now she knew what had happened: She had been tricked. Her encounter with Jon Le Moyne had been arranged by the Dark One. She had been set up and had fallen into the trap like a child reaching for candy.

And it became clear to her now that Sam's behavior had been influenced by the dark forces in Logandale. And with that knowledge came the realization that Desiree Lemieux was not a child of the Dark One. The young woman had been duped along with the rest of them. But, like Sam, Nydia knew Sam's demon child was near. But who was it?

"Oh, what a sight you made today," the dark evil whisper reached Nydia. A hot wind sighed around the car. "Squatting naked on the floor and orally loving my young convert." The wind laughed obscenely. "So now you see how easy it is, my turncoat half-daughter. You see how weak and silly your faith is? Of course, you do. You see how simple it is for me? Bah! It is no contest this way. I release you to fight me in any manner you find acceptable. You may now go join your silly friends. But you will remember your time spent with young

Le Moyne. You will remember the sensation of him plunging into your depths. You will remember all the emotions he invoked within you, and who knows, they may pull you back to him—very unexpectedly." The wind laughed hotly and smugly as it faded.

Nydia felt unclean as she pulled out into the road. She longed for a hot bath. Anything to help alleviate this feeling of filth covering her mind and body.

She drove to Janet's and parked on the street, by the curb. Again, she was conscious of evil eyes watching her. Nydia walked slowly up the walkway. Janet met her on the porch. Something had changed in the girl's eyes. But what was it? Nydia was too tired and emotionally drained to understand. But full comprehension was only seconds away. She held out her arms and Little Sam came to her.

Janet said, "Tell me, Nydia: Did you have a nice drive around town?"

Nydia looked into young/old eyes. Eyes of evil. Hooded as a cobra. The evil mocked the woman. Full understanding came to Nydia. The young girl had deceived them all; all this time. Beginning back at Falcon House. Three years ago.

Janet was one of them.

Nydia stood firm as new faith filled her. "Yes, Janet. I would be lying if I said that for a time I didn't enjoy this afternoon."

"I'm certain it was very—ah—fulfilling," the teenager said with a smirk.

Nydia wanted to reach up and slap the girl. She controlled that urge and said calmly, "I don't believe we'll be needing your services any longer, Janet."

"Oh, my!" the teenager feigned great disappointment and alarm. "I must have done something to displease you, Miss Nydia."

Within the house, Janet's parents began laughing, the laughter ugly.

Deep color touched Nydia's face. She lost her temper. "You lying, deceitful, goddamned sorry little bitch!" she hissed at the girl.

Janet's eyes grew dark with uncontrolled evil. The wickedness lanced out at Nydia, touching her. The woman wanted to run but found strength within her to face the depravity leaping at her.

Janet licked her lips, running her tongue over her teeth. "This is not the end, Nydia. This is but the beginning. We will have other encounters, you and I. Some will be pleasant, others not so pleasant. I do not question my Master's actions. What is done is done. My Master and your Master have been playing this game for longer than time itself. I will admit that I do not know all the rules. But this time my Master feels the victory will be ours. Else he would not have changed the game plan. Personally, I would have kept you and Sam under our control, stumbling about in confusion, making fools of yourselves, and

providing us some amusement. But I am not as smart as the Master. I do not know all or see all. So I do not know why my Master returned your clarity." She shrugged. "I am sure my Master's way is the best way. Goodbye, Nydia. Take your—child home and care for him." She laughed. "And be prepared for many surprises." She turned and walked back into the house.

Nydia stood for a moment, looking at the closed door. She could feel the evil emanating from the house, along with the odor of unwashed bodies. She walked slowly back to her car. She and Sam had a lot of talking to do; a lot of understanding to reach. A lot of planning ahead of them.

She hoped they would be strong enough to face what lay before them. She thought they would. She felt their love for each other would help greatly.

Sam was waiting on the porch of their house. She got out of the car and stood for a moment with Little Sam in her arms. She stood silently looking at the tall, muscular young man on the porch, returning the silent look. She initiated the first move toward understanding.

She walked toward him.

"We were tricked," Sam said. "Satan had both of us in his grasp. It isn't any excuse for what we did; we should have called on our faith to sustain us. But," he said with a shrug, "we can't undo what was done. We can put it behind us and look ahead."

"You know about Janet?"

"Yes. I just put it all together. It came in such a rush it was staggering."

"For me, too. Sam, I don't believe Desiree Lemieux is one of them."

"I think that way, too. But the child of the Dark One—my child, is near. I can sense the presence."

"But who could it be?"

"I don't know. It may be another of Satan's tricks. But I don't think so."

"No. I don't either." She smiled. "Sam, I hate to tell you this. But you stink."

"Tell me. The devil pissed on me. I'll tell you all about it later."

"Gross!"

"Piss and gross," Little Sam said.

The young couple began laughing. Nydia climbed the steps to the porch and kissed her husband.

"We're going to make it, Sam. I—won't say it's going to be easy. I think we are both going to be tempted over and over again. Probably rougher than we've experienced so far. But I know I love you and you love me, and we both love God. If we can keep that in our minds and hearts at all times, we can make it through this."

"Yes," Sam agreed. "And we're going to have to work at it. You want to take a bath first? I'll watch Little Sam."

"Sam—as badly as I crave a long hot soak, please be my guest. And go before the wind changes. *Please!*"

Laughing in the face of Satan, the young couple and their son entered the house. They had renewed their faith, their love for each other, and for God. They felt they could now face the upcoming horror with all that in their favor.

The door closed behind them.

In the orchard beside the stone house, a Beast stuck its ugly head out of the ground. The Beast was confused. It sensed something it did not like. The house beside the old orchard now contained two people whose love of its Master's enemy overrode their fear. The Beast was uncomfortable with that. He would tell the others about the people, and they would try to avoid contact.

"You see," the thunder rolled across the firmament, "faith is still strong among some."

"Umm," the warrior replied. He was not yet convinced his help was not needed.

"I think," the thunder rumbled, "the Arrogant One has just made the mistake that will defeat him. If the small group can endure what is in store for them."

"In Logandale," the warrior amended that.

"To be sure. But of course there will be many, many more like Logandale."

"Of course," the warrior replied, his statement containing more than a touch of sarcasm.

The Giver of Life and Light and Hope chuckled. "You're just annoyed because you missed a fight, Michael."

"As the Devil Child said, 'This is not the end, but the beginning.'"

"That is quite true. This confrontation will not be of the magnitude of the conflict at Falcon House, I am thinking. This one will pit pure Good against black Evil. Of course, I could be wrong."

"Pity I don't have a stone and a hammer handy," the warrior said. "I'd like to save that last bit forever."

The look the warrior received caused a monsoon on Earth. It did not bother the warrior.

"Are You saying I might yet be called upon?" the warrior asked.

The sigh blew across the heavens. "Will you *ever* learn patience, Michael?"

"How many times have You asked me that?"

"I could tell you precisely, but it would only serve to depress me."

The warrior chuckled and took his place beside the Giver of Life.

The warrior wished things would pick up in Logandale. He enjoyed a good fight.

When Sam and Nydia arrived at the Draper home, Little Sam was with them, for they could not trust anyone with him. They found a discouraged Father Le Moyne sitting with Noah and Monty and Viv Draper. Mille joined the group. Ginny had gone into mild shock and was in bed.

As briefly as possible, Sam told them what had happened that day, to him. Nydia picked up when Sam quit. She left nothing out, but was as eloquent about the telling as she could be.

Father Le Moyne crossed himself and muttered a small prayer when she told the priest about his brother and sister-in-law.

"You're certain Jon said my brother and his wife were fatally injured?"

"Yes, Father," Nydia replied. "And he said you would see them both tonight."

"But of course I'll see them tonight."

"I don't think that was the type of visit Jon had in mind," Nydia said softly.

The priest looked confused for a moment. Then full understanding bloomed in his mind. He rose, his face masked with rage. "That is unthinkable. Outrageous! I simply will not permit it." He was gripping the large cross so tightly his knuckles were white from the strain.

"You won't have anything to say about it, Father," Sam spoke. "Besides, I would imagine the unthinkable has already occurred. And I doubt they were killed in any car accident. My guess would be they didn't get more than five miles outside of Logandale."

"But—the state police called Jon," Father Le Moyne said. "How—" He trailed it off into silence.

Sam picked up the phone in the den. He punched the number of a friend in New York City. "I am sorry for the inconvenience," a woman's voice said. "But telephone service is temporarily disrupted in the Logandale area. Repair crews are working to restore service as quickly as possible. We apologize for this temporary inconvenience."

"Guess that 'bout settles it," Joe said. "We're cut off tight."

Mille put her face in her hands and fought back tears. Viv went to her and put her arms around the young woman.

"We've told you what happened to us," Nydia said. "What happened here today?"

"Why—everything went just marvellously well!" Noah said, his tone full of undisguised disgust and sarcasm. "Some creature from the bowels of hell came lurching down that hall," he said pointing, "and Daniel proved his courage by confronting the—*thing*. He was then

verbally assaulted by that young fool, Hasseling. I finally ordered Hasseling from the house—and then realized it wasn't my house!" Sam had to smile at that. "Hasseling and Byron Price then left together—ostensibly to rally support for their mistaken belief that all of us," he said indicating the entire group, including Sam and Nydia, "are candidates for the nut house because of our knowledge that Satan is present here in Logandale. We'll probably never see the two young fools again. And I, personally, would consider that a great blessing."

"That is not very Christian of you Noah," Father Le Moyne gently admonished his friend. "They are of different ideological beliefs. They were taught from childhood to believe in Satan, but at the same contradictory time, to scoff and disbelieve in demonic possession and related fields. Their behavior is really not their fault in the main."

"Very charitable and commendable of you, Daniel." Noah stood his ground. "But I fail to see how any so-called intelligent human could deny the existence of Satan on earth. It is simply beyond my comprehension. Richard Hasseling and Byron Price can, as far as I am concerned, go jump into the river."

"Where is Father Morton?" Sam asked, wisely changing the subject.

"He went to his home. He, at least," Noah said, not backing away from his opinion of Hasseling and Price, "has the good sense to see beyond the end of his nose. He went to get his wife, Barbara, and their children."

"Dear little Janet," Father Le Moyne muttered. "Such a sweet child. So gentle with children. It's—difficult for me to believe it about her. Jon—well, I knew something was troubling him. I tried more than once to talk with him. He would turn his back to me; refuse to speak of it. I should have known. I should have known."

"Should have *known*?" Viv said. "How could you have known? I still can't believe all this is happening. How can you say you should have known?"

Sam and Nydia both caught the look that passed between Father Le Moyne and Noah. The priest smiled. "I—have been on speaking terms with the Dark One on—shall we say, more than one occasion, Vivian. And Noah knows him just as well—perhaps even more intimately than I." The priest turned his eyes to Sam. "But young Mr. Balon and Nydia know Satan far better than any of us. I, for one, am prepared to follow Sam's orders. I might not agree with all of them. But I think if we are to survive this—ordeals, we had best elect a person to give the orders."

"I'll go along with that," Joe said. "Me and Mille talked about that a few hours. After Sam told us what happened up in Canada. Now—" He sighed. "I ain't sayin' I believe all that Sam said—'bout all them creatures and monsters bein' called out and such—but in my present state of mind, I'm just 'bout ready to believe *anything*. I do have one

question, though. Sam, how come we can't just pack it up and clear out of here?"

"Oh, I think you people can," Sam told the group. "I don't think anyone would stop you. Not now. Satan has changed the rules of the game. But I don't think any of you would remember a thing once you got past the city limits sign. But Nydia and I wouldn't be allowed to leave. We play too important a role in the scheme of Satan's plans." He looked at Father Le Moyne. "Do you agree with that, Father?"

The priest nodded his head in agreement. "For most of us it comes down to a matter of choice. Yes. For now, I think for a very short time, most would be allowed to leave. But that time is, I believe, growing short."

"I got to get to my little sister, Jeanne," Mille said. "I'm afraid of what might be happening to her at home."

"What do you mean?" Monty asked. "At home?"

"Jeanne was at the Giddon place the other night— My God! Was it just last night?" She shook her head. "Anyway, ever since Momma died, Dad had—well, he's been looking at Jeanne in—that way, you know? I'm almost certain he's gotten to her, sexually. This was probably his plan all along. But maybe it isn't too late - for her. If I can reach her and talk to her, maybe I can save her. If I have to, I'll use my fists and beat the hell out of her."

Viv looked horrified. "You mean your father has been having sexual relations with his own *daughter*? That's disgusting!"

"Goes on a lot more than you might think, honey," Monty told her. "And not just between father and daughter. Mother and son, as well. Sometimes mother with daughter, father with son. One report given us at the NYPD stated that only a very small percentage of incest cases are ever reported to the authorities."

"People who do that ought to be horse-whipped," Joe said. He sighed heavily, as if suddenly plunged deep into thought. "I guess I got to do it, and it ain't gonna get done 'less I do her, so I might as well get rollin' on it." He stood up.

"Where are you going, Joe?" Mille asked.

"I got to go see if Nellie is really one of—them other people. Maybe it ain't too late for her."

"I think," Monty said, "we should decide something right now. And it's a whale of a big decision. Are we staying or leaving?"

"I'm stayin'," Joe said flatly. "There ain't no son-of-a-bitch runnin' this ol' Kentucky boy out of his home. I'm stayin' and I'm fightin'." He glanced at Mille.

"I'm staying," the young woman announced. "This is my home town and I've got family here to look after. I can shoot a pistol as good as any man and I'll use a gun if I have to. Count me in."

"I wonder about Ginny?" Monty asked.

"Ginny is in no shape to make any kind of decision," Mille replied. "But she told me just a few minutes ago, she was no coward. That she wanted to help in any way she could. So I guess that means she's staying."

"Well, you can certainly count on my standing firm," Noah told the group. "I learned the hard way about attempting to kill Old Nick, but his followers—most of them—are mortal, and can therefore be killed. And that is something that should have been done around here several years ago. I am staying."

"I don't like all this talk about killing," Monty said, the lawman rising up in him. He looked at Noah. "Even though I can understand your feelings on the matter. And it might come to that."

"It will," Sam said, a coldness to his voice. "And you can bet on that."

"Maybe," Monty said. He glanced at his wife.

She met his gaze. "I believe the man said, 'For better or for worse,' did he not?"

"I can assure all of you," Father Le Moyne spoke quietly. "Conditions will become a lot worse."

"Figured one of you would have to say that," Joe announced glumly.

SEVEN

Father Le Moyne accompanied Joe and Mille. They would first visit Joe's wife, and then check on Mille's sister. Monty issued all the people Logandale P.D. handy-talkies, enabling them to keep in constant communication. The walkie-talkies had a range of about five miles; strong enough for the limited area they were confined within.

Viv went in to check on Ginny. She was sleeping deeply, the sleep very much like a coma. Mille had said the young woman spooked easily, and the events of that afternoon had taxed her to the limits.

Late afternoon shadows were dotting the land, creating an aura that under different circumstances would have been labeled a lovely late fall afternoon. Now it only served to heighten the dread of coming night for the small band of men and women who still believed in God Almighty and His words concerning right and wrong.

"Just for kicks," Monty said, "I'd like to see just how far I could drive outside of town."

"Don't," Noah warned him. "You might not be allowed to reenter. And we need all the Christians we can muster for this battle."

His wife settled the short debate. "You stay here with me, Monty. We agreed to stay together and that's the way it's going to be."

"Yes, honey," Monty said.

Dusk began to subtly but swiftly place her dark arms around the town. The murky embrace was welcomed by those who looked to Satan for leadership. It was received with much less joy by those outside the circles of the coven.

"What can we expect?" Viv asked Nydia. The women were sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee and chatting. And waiting.

"Expect anything your mind could conjure in its darkest moments," Nydia replied. She then spoke quietly, telling the woman of her experiences in Falcon House; of her being raped by her stepfather in the casket, while Sam, believing her dead, was being seduced by Roma, Nydia's mother. She left nothing out.

Viv shuddered, as if experiencing the chilly touch of death and throwing it away from her. "I used to enjoy reading horror stories. The scarier the better; especially on a stormy night. I never dreamt I would be actually living through the real thing." She toyed with her coffee mug. "That is, *if* any of us live through it."

Nydia rose and refilled their cups. "It isn't too late for you and Monty and most of the others to leave," she reminded the older woman. "It's Father Le Moyne, Noah, Sam, Little Sam, and me they want. We could not leave."

"Don't think I haven't thought of it," Viv admitted. "A lot. But something within me said No! And I've had time to think about that. It's a test of faith, isn't it, Nydia?"

"Yes. It all comes down to that. But it's so much more, too."

Viv thought about that for a moment. "Yes. It is. I can see that, now. But is one little town in Upstate New York so important?"

"Not really. As Sam tried to explain, this is a game. A game that has been going on for—well, forever, I suppose. I don't think being a Christian is nearly as easily accomplished as a great many people believe. I don't believe—and neither does Sam—that a person can sin all their life, then at the moment of death, be relieved of all those sins. I think a person must work terribly hard, all their life, to be a true Christian. And I think—I know—there will be a great many people very disappointed on Judgment Day."

Viv smiled. "I'm sure that would provoke a very spirited debate between you and Father Le Moyne."

Nydia returned the smile. "I'm sure of that. I wonder how Joe is doing?"

"Sounds like quite a party going on in there, Joe," Mille said, after listening for a moment.

The music from the house was very loud, booming out into the gathering night. The rock and roll music was rattling the windows as it blasted out of the speakers, pushing to the limits and beyond the

capabilities of the woofers and tweeters.

"Nellie never liked rock and roll music," Joe said. "As a matter of fact, she hated it. And I guess that tells everybody something. Make whatever you like about it."

"I heard that, Joe," Mille said. "Couple of years ago, I wouldn't have agreed with it. Now I do. And not just because of what is happening to us now. Joe? You got your pistol with you?"

"I got my pants on, ain't I?" he responded. "You?"

"Yes, Joe," Mille said with a smile. "I have my pants on."

"Cute, Mille," Joe said, as Father Le Moyne struggled to hide his smile. "That's real cute."

"I also have my pistol, too," Mille needled him. She looked at Father Le Moyne. "You going to wait here or come with us, Father?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything in this world," the priest replied.

"Or the next?" Mille teased him gently. Father Le Moyne was her very favorite person in the whole world. Joe, although he didn't know it—yet—was number two on her list of special people. Father Le Moyne had known Mille since the day she entered the world.

"I won't commit myself to that," Le Moyne responded with a gentle smile.

"I wish ya'll'd quit talkin' 'bout stuff like that," Joe said. "I think it's spooky enough without all that stuff."

Halfway up the sidewalk, the front door opened and Nellie stood framed in the rectangular light. She wore only a thin nightgown. The light from behind her gave glaring evidence that she wore nothing under the gown.

"Hello, Joe-baby," she said, her voice just audible over the blaring noise.

"Nellie," Joe said.

The woman took a long swig from the half pint of whiskey in her hand. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked contemptuously at the priest. "You come here to save my lost soul, Zorro?"

Father Le Moyne surprised them all with his lack-of-patience reply. "I don't know whether your soul is even worth saving, Nellie."

She laughed at the priest. "Fuck you."

"Nellie—" Joe stepped forward.

"Butt out, horse-face," his wife told him. "This is between Captain Midnight and me." She swung her eyes to the priest. She lifted her gown and exposed herself to the trio. "How about some pussy, Padre?"

"Thank you, but no," the priest muttered.

"Oh, that's right," Nellie said, dropping her gown. "You people are married to that wimp, Jesus. Ain't that the way it is?"

"Something like that," Father Le Moyne said acidly. "What did the

Dark One promise you, Nellie?"

"He didn't just promise, he delivered. And that is one hell of a lot more than your God can do, Le Moyne. All you people have is vague promises and nothing material. So why don't you people just carry your asses on away from here and leave me alone?"

"He arrested your cancer," the priest pegged it accurately.

"You got that right, buddy. And for the first time in longer than I can remember, Nellie-gal is having herself a natural good time."

"It isn't too late, Nellie," Joe said. "I think Father Le Moyne can—well, fix it, if only you'd let him. Won't you please try?"

"Oh, fuck you, Joe! You have to be kidding." Her voice was filled with contempt. "Go back to all that suffering? No way, Jose." She grinned, and the trio could feel the evil touching them. "You folks wanna come in and join the party? It's about to get real good. Sylvia Sakall just bet Hoss Patrick she could deep-throat him, and Hoss has a cock on him looks like a big sausage. Ought to be interesting, don't you think? How about it?" She looked at Mille. "The talk I used to hear around town was that you liked to fuck, Mille. You spread it around pretty good, 'way the stories go. Why don't you come in and join us? Paul Reeves just made the comment he'd like to bend you over and shove it up your ass. How does that sound to you, Mille?"

Joe put his hand on the butt of his pistol. Mille put her hand on Joe's arm. "No, Joe," she spoke softly. Only Joe and the priest could hear her words. "Not yet.

They haven't made any hostile moves toward us."

"Listen to her, Joe," the priest urged. "It will come to that. But not yet."

"I think I'll pass, Nellie," Mille said.

"We'll get you," the older woman promised. "I want to see it when you get passed around. I want to hear you squall."

"You're all insane!" Mille hissed at the woman.

Nellie threw back her head and laughed.

"I'll see you around, Nellie," Joe promised. "Bet on it."

Nellie once more laughed. "I'm sure you will, sweetie," she told him. "But Hoss is gonna see a whole lot more of me first. What he's got ought to feel good sliding in and out. You wanna watch us, baby?"

Joe lost his temper. "You goddamned slut! You black-hearted whore. You—"

Nellie stepped back into the house and slammed the front door. Mille pulled Joe toward the car. "Come on, Joe. It's all over here. She's lost. Cursing her isn't going to help."

"It'd help me," Joe muttered, getting behind the wheel of the car. "I just can't believe the change in that woman. But she's lost. I can sense it."

Driving away, Father Le Moyne spoke from the back seat. "Joe, I have to ask you this. Are you a Christian?"

"Yes, sir. I was washed in the blood back when I was just a little shaver. I been goin' to the Methodist church near 'bouts all my life."

"Do you believe in God the Father Almighty and the Lord Jesus Christ?"

"Yes, sir. I sure do."

"I don't have to ask Mille. Mille was a—little wild when she was in high school. But she outgrew that and tecame a fine woman."

"A *little* wild, Father?" Mille blurted.

Father Le Moyne smiled in the darkness of the back seat. "I like to give people the benefit of the doubt, Mille."

"Father?" Mille said, her voice no more than a whisper. "I'm scared."

So, too, am I, child, the priest thought. He said instead, "Trust in the Lord, child. And He will provide protection. Keep your faith strong."

"If you don't mind, Father," Joe said. "And don't think I'm being sacrilegious, but do you think He would object if I included my .357 in on the deal as well?"

Father Le Moyne laughed. The laugh felt good to him. "No, Joe. No. I don't think He would object one little bit." The priest sobered. He wondered when his brother would visit him; and how he would handle that visit.

There is only one way to handle it, the priest thought. And he wondered if he would, or could, find the strength to make that awful move against his brother and sister-in-law.

The priest knew he had to somehow find the strength.

Or become one of the undead.

"Feel like taking a ride, Noah?" Sam asked the writer. He checked his .41 mag as he asked the question.

Monty's head jerked up. "Where are you two going? And why?"

"I want to see what's going on around town, and I want to get Desiree; bring her out here." He looked at Nydia. "If you don't have any objections, that is."

"I don't have any objections, Sam," she said. "I was thinking the same thing just then. You must have picked up on my thoughts."

"You two can read each other's thoughts?" Viv asked.

"A lot of the time," Nydia said with a smile. "Really makes a marriage interesting."

"Spare me that," Monty muttered.

Nydia said to Sam, "If she's not one of them, Sam, then by all means, she should be provided safety with our group."

"Jon Le Moyne?" Sam asked her.

Nydia shook her head. "You can try, Sam, if you want to take the

time. But I personally think it's far too late for Jon."

Noah stood up. "Let me say something at this juncture, people." The group looked at him. "I know you all must think I look and sometimes behave ridiculously. But let me tell you all: I hold belts in both karate and judo, and I am a crack shot with rifle, pistol, and shotgun. Do not think for one instant I cannot or will not stand firm."

Sam stood up, towering over the smaller man. "I don't think that at all, Noah," he said. "You can watch my back for me anytime."

Noah said, "Let's go have a look around town, Sam."

They drove first to Jon's house, parking in front of the home. A party was in progress. Loud music and wild young laughter spilled from the home. The music was almost unbearable. Noah glanced at Sam and shook his head in disgust. "He gets word that his parents are killed and the punk has a party. I think we are wasting our time by visiting young Mr. Le Moyne, Sam."

"Yeah, I agree with you. But I said I'd try. So let's give it a go. You game?"

"Lead on, D'Artagnan."

The two men walked up the sidewalk to the house. Sam was thinking: The man may be small, and he might look odd, to our way of thinking in terms of dress, but he's sure got some brass on his ass.

Before the men got halfway up the sidewalk, the front door opened and young people spilled out, forming a half circle around the two men.

"If trouble starts," Noah said, "I'll take the punks to Jon's right, you take those to the left."

"Done," Sam said, not taking his eyes off Jon Le Moyne. The young man's eyes were both defiant and sullen. "Your uncle is very worried about you, Jon."

"Fuck my uncle!" Jon spat the words. "No," he said with an ugly smile. "I'll leave that to Noah. Tell me something, Noah. With you and my good uncle, who was the fuckee and who was the fuckor?"

"You have an exceedingly filthy mouth, young man," Noah admonished the young man. "Whatever happened between Father Le Moyne and myself—and it was not what you are implying—is ancient history. And it is certainly none of your concern, you shitty little twit!"

Noah's words were greeted by hoots and shouts of dirty laughter. One young man, no more than fifteen years old, unzipped his jeans and pulled out his penis. "Here, little man," he called to Noah. "You like to suck cocks so much, come over here and suck on this."

"They have it all twisted out of shape," Noah said, his words reaching only Sam's ears. "No one ever understands, or tries to understand."

"Your friends do, Noah," Sam told him. "And that is all that matters."

Screw all the others."

"Look on the porch!" Noah whispered.

Sam lifted his eyes. A dark shape flitted back and forth on the glass-enclosed porch. It was not human, but yet somehow more than animal. Even cloaked in darkness, the shape appeared hideously deformed. Evil emanated from it.

"What in the name of God is that horrible-looking thing?" Sam blurted hoarsely.

Jon wheeled around, as did most of the young people at the front of the semicircle facing the two men. Jon looked back at Sam. "What's what? I don't see anything."

"It's the Dark One," Noah's whisper was just as hoarsely uttered as Sam's question. "For our eyes only. Few can witness him in his true shape, for to do so means almost certain death. I was one of the very few who ever saw him and lived to speak of it."

"He's taunting us?"

"Yes. Do not look directly at him," Noah warned him. "If you meet his eyes you will be harmed."

"Thanks for telling me," Sam muttered. He raised his voice. "One last time, Jon. And this is your last chance. Come with us."

The young man grinned and scratched his crotch. "Your wife had real good pussy, Balon. And she said she never had a cock like mine before. She liked it so much she licked on it like it was an ice cream cone. I was going to give it to her up the ass. But that can wait for a later date. We have the time."

Sam held his temper in check. "Jon, pleasures of the flesh are not worth losing your soul over. Think about it. For if you don't come with us now, there will not be another chance for you."

"Eternal life has been promised to us all," Jon said. "And it has been promised that we shall see you grovel and beg for mercy from our Master. I look forward to that, Balon." Jon began laughing.

Sam cut the laughing short by stepping forward and slugging the young man, knocking him sprawling on his butt. Just as the young man's friends closed in, Sam jerked the .41 mag from his belt and shoved the muzzle in a young man's face. The cocking of the big pistol was loud in the sudden silence.

Noah pulled his .357 and jacked back the hammer. He looked as if he would enjoy using it.

The young man with the pistol barrel under his chin paled, but did not back up.

"I'll blow you straight to hell, boy," Sam said, in a low menacing voice.

"So there'll be another time, Balon," Jon said, as he moaned on the ground. His mouth was bloody from Sam's fist. "No rush. We have all

the time we need."

"Start backing up," Sam told Noah. "Slow and easy does it."

The men backed up, slowly edging toward Sam's pickup. Noah stood guard until Sam was in the Chevy and had the motor running. The young people had followed the pair, always keeping at a safe distance.

Claude Sullivan said, "I think we'll give you to the Beasts, Noah." He laughed. "That ought to be fun, watching them have your ass."

Noah smiled, and for a moment, Sam thought the man was going to shoot the boy. Noah said, "Here's something to remember me by, punks." He lowered the muzzle of his pistol slightly and pulled the trigger, emptying the weapon at the feet of the young Satan worshippers. The booming of the .357 was enormous in the quiet night. The slugs sent the young people scattering in all directions, yelling and running. Noah laughed and got in the truck. Sam dropped the truck in gear and roared off.

"That was fun!" Noah said, as he reloaded the .357.

Sam smiled. Any doubts he might have had concerning Noah had disappeared. The man would stand firm. "I think you got your point across, Noah."

"I considered shooting that Sullivan punk in the belly. But I think it would be best if they initiated the first violent move."

"That will come soon enough, Noah," Sam said. "And when it does it will come suddenly."

"I believe it."

They came to the Fox Estate. Both men could feel the evil emanating from the grounds of the Giddon House. Noah commented on it.

"It's all right there," Sam said. And for a moment his mind went back to Falcon House and the siege. (The Devil's Heart)

"You think you—or one of us—will have to enter the Giddon House?" Noah asked.

"No doubt in my mind, Noah. And I am not looking forward to it."

He pulled into the curving driveway of the Fox Estate and abruptly stopped. He looked at Noah. "Noah? Something just popped into my mind. Tell me, if you can, who founded Nelson College?"

"Why—Norman Giddon's great-grandfather. He—" Noah paused, deep in thought. "Yes. That's it, isn't it? The college is a training ground for Satan's converts." He slapped the palm of his hand on his forehead. "My God! Why didn't I see that before!"

"You were probably blocked from it. No telling how many covens have been established around the nation by graduates of Nelson. Satan's turned his movement into a big business."

Before Noah could reply, hard screaming cut the night. Both men searched the surrounding gloom. "There!" Noah pointed to Sam's left.

It was Desiree. She was naked. Sam spun the pickup and kicked on his high beams. The lights flashed on the young woman's nakedness. She had been beaten, the cruel marks of the whip crisscrossed her skin. Small silver chains dangled from the nipples of her breasts.

"Oh, my Lord!" Noah cried. "What has been done to that poor girl?"

"Desiree!" Sam shouted, opening the door. "Over here. It's Sam!"

The panicked and frightened young woman turned and almost slipped on the damp grass. She raced toward the sound of a friendly voice. "Behind me!" she managed to gasp out the warning.

A dozen or more men and boys were chasing Desiree, some of them clad only in their underwear. They had been taking turns raping and beating the young woman. Some of them were armed.

Desiree fell exhausted into Sam's arms and he picked her up and literally tossed her into the cab of the truck. He spun around. Using a two-handed grip on the .41 mag, Sam lined up a near naked man and gently squeezed the trigger. The pistol roared in the night, fire lancing from the muzzle. The man stopped abruptly and was slung backward, the big hollow-point slug ripping into his belly and tearing out his back, taking a fist-sized chunk of meat as it exited.

Noah's .357 roared twice. Two men dropped to the grass, one of them gut shot, the other howling in pain, part of his hip torn away.

"In the truck!" Sam yelled. He jumped behind the wheel. He gunned the engine just as Noah slammed the door, the back tires biting into the concrete drive.

The truck fishtailed as Sam slid onto the road in front of the mansion and headed for the Draper home. Noah removed his jacket and placed it around Desiree's shoulders. He felt slightly sick to his stomach as his eyes picked up the whip marks, the silver chains dangling from her nipples, and the studded dog collar around her slender neck.

"Filthy perverted sons of bitches!" Noah said. He worked at the clasp of the collar and removed it, tossing the studded leather out the window.

Desiree almost screamed in relief as she removed the silver alligator clips from her swollen nipples. Small silver chains dangled from the clips.

"They used these to force me into submission," she sobbed. "They were going to pierce my nipples and insert permanent rings. They forced me to my knees and took me like a *dog*!" she wailed. "Then two of them raped me at once. Oh, God!" she cried. "What kind of place is this? Sam—those things we did this afternoon. We did do them, didn't we? It's—all kind of a blur in my mind. When I woke up, I thought it had been a dream. Then Perkins brought those men and—"

"Perkins?" Sam asked. "Did you say Perkins? Jimmy Perkins?"

"Yes. Jimmy Perkins. He's a caretaker, a grounds-keeper at the estate." She glanced at him. "Why do you ask? Do you know that—horrible man?"

"Yeah, I know him," Sam said, conscious of Noah's eyes on him. "Tall lean fellow. Walks with a shuffle."

"Yes, that's him. He's—a terrible person." Desiree shivered from fright and shock and the cold against her bare skin. "He's a terrible man."

"He isn't a man," Sam said. "He's one of the undead." Very briefly, he told them what he knew of Jimmy Perkins.

"Good Lord!" Noah said. "You first encountered this—creature up in Canada?"

"Yes. But my father fought him back in Nebraska, in 1958. That's when Perkins died, and was reborn with the Devil's help."

"It's just too much for me to believe," Desiree said, tears streaming down her face. She put her face in her hands and wept. She lifted her face and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief provided her by Noah. She murmured a prayer in French and crossed herself.

Sam glanced at her, a puzzled look in his eyes. "I thought you were an agnostic."

"So did I," she replied. "I don't know why I did that. I wasn't conscious of even knowing any prayers. I don't know where the sign of the cross came from."

"I do," Noah told her gently. "You're one of us now, Desiree. So welcome aboard the Good Ship Lollipop."

Sam laughed at Noah. "The more the merrier," he said. "Desiree, tell me, what do your parents do for a living?"

"Why—they own many businesses around the world. Some of them in France. For years, my father was a vice president for the Roma Companies. Something happened to the owner about—three years ago, I think. That's when my father branched out on his own."

"Uh-huh," Sam said. "Now it's all beginning to come together; the pieces are fitting. Tell me, do your parents ever wear any type of medallion?"

"Why—now that you mention it, yes, they do. It's—kind of a strange-looking medallion. Very intricate in design. They tried, many times, ever since I was a little girl, to make me wear one like theirs. But every time I tried, I got sick. I mean, really physically ill. Or this terrible rash would cover my body. Finally, just a few weeks ago, as a matter of fact, they told me I was leaving France, and going to school in America. At Nelson College. They said that would prove their findings—one way or the other. I never did understand what they were talking about. Do you know?"

"Yes," Sam answered. "I sure do. You and Nydia will get along fine,

I'm thinking. You both have a great deal in common."

"I am so ashamed for what happened today, Sam," Desiree said. "I don't—I don't know if I can even face your wife."

"As long as you do not renounce the Lord God, my dear," Noah told her, "for our God is a forgiving God. If He can forgive us our human sins, surely the least we can do for Him is to practice forgiveness among ourselves."

The young woman looked at him and smiled. She kept her opinions—if any—about his manner of dress to herself. "Thank you, Mr.—"

"Crisp. But please call me Noah. Sam, you have puzzled me somewhat. What was that line of questioning about medallions? And you, my dear, what was all that about your getting sick? Would you be so kind as to clear that up for me?"

"Nydia's mother's name was Roma. The witch. She owned the companies where Desiree's father was VP. Roma tried to force Nydia to wear the Devil's medallion, but like Desiree, Nydia's—something in her body—or mind—refused to accept the medallion. They made her very sick. My belief is that God saw good in Nydia, and in Desiree, and intervened in His usual quiet manner. That's what that was all about."

He wondered if he should tell them about the tablet. He decided against it. He had a hunch that would be left up to him—solely.

"I see," Noah said. "I—" He bit the words off before they rolled from his tongue. He was about to ask if Sam knew anything about the tablet, then thought better of it. The young man had enough weight on his shoulders without adding any more.

"You were about to say something, Noah?" Sam asked.

"It slipped my mind, Sam," he lied. "Must not have been very important."

They pulled into the Draper's driveway. Noah said, "Sam, would you be a dear boy and run into the house; ask Viv for a robe of some sort for Desiree. That jacket is positively indecent. I'll sit with her while you do that."

While Viv was getting Desiree a robe, Sam told those in the den what had happened. "And she is wondering if you can forgive her, Nydia."

"There is nothing to forgive, Sam," Nydia said. "None of us had any control over ourselves." She rose as Viv entered the den. "Here." Nydia held out her hand. "Let me take the robe to her."

Before Nydia could open the door, the sounds of Desiree's screaming and Noah's big .357 barking came to those in the house.

The house was plunged into darkness and Viv began shrieking in terror. "Get it off me!" she wailed. "Get it off me!"

EIGHT

"Yes," Mille told her sister. "Yes, you are most certainly coming with us. And if I have to drag your butt out of this house, I will. Now, get moving, girl!"

"Fuck you!" the teenager screamed. "You can't make me do a goddamn thing."

Mille slapped her, rocking the girl's head back and forth with the backhanded pops. Blood dotted the girl's mouth. Pete LaMeade stepped forward, his hands balled into fists. Joe stuck a pistol in the man's face.

"Just hold it right there, Pete," he told the man. "'Cause I'll damn sure blow your head off."

"This is kidnapping!" the father yelled. "And I ain't gonna stand still for it."

"No, it ain't kidnapping, Pete," Joe corrected the man. "And yeah, you're gonna stand still for it. What did you plan on doin'? Callin' a cop?"

Pete shot dark arrows of hate at Joe. But he made no further attempt to interfere. "We'll get you," he warned Joe. "Bet on it, Bennett."

Mille jerked the sobbing girl to her feet and shoved her toward the front door. "Before this night is over, little sister, you'll either be free of your possession—or you'll be dead. I guarantee you, Jeanne. One way or the other."

"You goddamn bitch!" the teenager cursed Mille. "You got all the pecker you wanted, then you turned righteous on us. If you had all the cocks sticking out of you that you've had stuck in you, you'd look like a fucking porcupine."

"Shut your filthy mouth," Mille warned her.

"Lousy two-bit whore!" Jeanne popped off.

Mille balled her right hand into a fist and the girl shut her mouth.

"A crowd gathering out in the front yard," Father Le Moyne told them. "And they're armed and ugly."

Joe grabbed Pete LaMeade by the arm and jerked him to the front door. He stuck his .357 in the small of the man's back and jacked back the hammer. "We're goin' through that crowd, LaMeade. Now you tell them godless bastards to clear us a path—a wide one—or I swear before God Almighty, I'll kill you, Pete."

LaMeade believed the smaller man. Sweat formed on his face. "All right, Joe. I'll do it. But we'll meet again. Bet on that."

"I can't hardly wait, partner," Joe told him. "But for right now—move it!"

The crowd of people, teenagers to middle-aged men and women,

parted at Pete's orders. But they did so reluctantly, with open hate shining in their eyes, and with filth rolling from their tongues.

"Farther back!" Joe told them, shouting at them. "I mean make a wide path and do it now! Between Mille and me, I can guarantee you ten of you will die if we have to start poppin' caps."

The crowd gave them room. In the safety of the car, driving away from the scene of ugliness, they relaxed just a bit.

Jeanne LaMeade asked Mille, "What are you gonna do with me?"

"Drive the demons from you," Mille told her. "Or kill you. Those are your only options, sister. And I'd think about that if I were you."

In the front seat, beside Joe, Father Daniel Le Moyne rubbed suddenly sweaty hands together. He silently prayed for God to give him strength. "Joe," he said, "take me to the church. I have to get some things."

Joe wondered if he was going to have to be a part of this spooky business of driving out demons. He sure hoped not.

"Yes, sir," Joe said.

Monty rushed to his wife's side, colliding with her in the darkness of the den. He smashed his fist into the white evil-looking face of a man who was trying to drag Viv from the house. Again and again he hit the man, smashing his nose. Blood squirted. Monty felt the man's teeth break off under his hard blows. The man finally fell to the floor, stunned, bleeding and hurt. Monty drew back his right foot and kicked the man on the side of the head.

Sam jerked his pistol from his waistband and ran out the front door in time to see Noah fighting several men, his .357 empty and useless on the sidewalk. Desiree was crouched in the cab of the pickup.

Whatever the trio of men expected from the small man, it was not the fury and skill now being shown by Noah. The man was fighting like an enraged tiger. And holding his own against the three bigger men.

Sam shoved his .41 mag back behind his belt and waded into the melee, fists swinging. The fight was over in seconds, the men moaning and bleeding on the sidewalk. Sam knew none of them.

"Two over there I shot," Noah panted, resettling his beret on his head. "They're either dead or dying." He pointed toward the darkness beside the Draper house.

But the men were gone.

"What—" Noah asked, looking at Sam. "But I *know* I hit them, and hit them accurately."

"The Beasts will feast this night," Sam said.

"I hope they get sick and die," the writer said, considerable heat in his tone. "What about this rabble?" he asked, pointing to the men on

the ground.

"Leave them. Unless you want to shoot them in the head. We don't have the space nor the inclination to jack around with a bunch of prisoners."

Noah looked at the tall young man. "What would you do with them, Sam? If I weren't standing here, that is."

"I'd shoot them," Sam replied. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and helped a badly shaken Desiree from the pickup. A plan was forming in Sam's head as he walked her up to the house.

Nydia and Viv took over the job of trying to settle down a hysterical Desiree. Sam sat in the den with Monty and Noah. Monty had dragged his wife's attacker out the back door and threw him in the alley. He then found the breaker box and turned the lights back on.

The phone jangled the nerves of all present.

"I thought it was out of order." Monty said.

"Only for us," Sam told him.

Monty jerked the receiver to his ear. "Yes?"

Sheriff Jenkins. "Heard about your bad news, Monty. Thought I'd call and see how you people were getting along."

"What bad news, Pat?"

"Oh—your getting fired and all that."

"Uh-huh. I'm certain you're really torn up about it, Pat," Monty replied.

The voice from the seat of Clark County chuckled darkly. "All right, Pat. We'll play it your way. When did you put it all together?"

"Although it seems like a week ago, Pat—yesterday. How long has it been going on?"

Again, the chuckle. "I don't see any harm in leveling with you, Monty. None of you people are ever going to talk about it. Long time, Monty. More than a hundred years back. Goes all the way back to my grandfather's time. Maybe even further back than that. I never question the Master, Monty. I just obey."

"You need help, Pat."

"I need help, son? You got it all backwards, son. Boy, you don't even realize what a bind you people are in, do you? You'll know it before long, I'm thinking. I'm going to fuck your wife, Monty. And I'm going to put it to her right in front of your eyes; make you watch me hump her. Snooty bitch always did think she was too good for us small-town folks. Of course," the voice took on a softer, smoother, soothing tone, "it don't have to be that way, Monty. You could change it. Join us, Monty. Don't fight us; you can't win."

Keep him talking, Monty thought. Anything to find out the odds against us. Keep him talking. "You're that certain you're going to win this, Pat."

"In the bag, Monty. In the bag. Son, if the Master would let us, we'd overrun you people by sheer numbers. But he wants to play with you for a time. Like a big cat with a little mouse. You get it, Monty. Mouse. Like in pussy. Your wife's pussy."

Monty kept his temper in check. "I don't think God will let us down, Pat."

"God?" the sheriff said with a nasty laugh. "Don't count on that wimp, Monty. He don't have a big enough set of balls to meet the Master head on."

Monty suppressed a shudder. He could not imagine himself speaking of God in that manner. "When do you make your move against us, Pat?"

"Soon, son. Very soon. It's going to be fun listening to you beg when we nail you to a cross."

"You're insane!" Monty said.

The dark laughter rolled through the lines.

"I'll see you, Pat," Monty said grimly.

"You're going to see me all right, Monty. You're going to watch me hump your wife." The line went dead.

Monty was conscious of his wife's eyes on him. He turned and looked at her. "Trouble, Monty?" she asked. "More trouble for us?"

He had never held back the truth from her. "Yes. Sheriff Jenkins is one of them. I would imagine some of his men are in it, too. So, yeah, more trouble."

"You're not telling me all of it, Monty. Did Pat mention me?"

"Yes. And I imagine you know in what way. It was—very ugly."

"He's undressed me with his eyes every time I've been around him. Spare me the details. The things that were done to that poor girl in there—Desiree—were positively disgusting."

"Yeah," Monty sighed the reply. "I bet so."

Viv came to him and put a hand on his arm. "We're going to make it, Monty."

"You betcha, babe." He grinned at her. "We're going to hang in there and go for it."

Monty's walkie-talkie clicked. Monty picked it up and acknowledged the signal.

"Father Le Moyne here, Monty. Let me speak with Sam for a moment, please."

Sam picked up his handy-talkie. "Go ahead, Father."

"Can you and your wife meet me at your house, Sam?" the priest asked. "Leave the child with Monty and Viv, if you will."

"I guess so, Father," Sam signaled. "Sure we can. What's going on?"

"Saving a lost soul."

"We're on our way."

Monty had, of course, heard the entire transmission. "Jon or Jeanne," he said.

"Forget Jon," Sam said, and Nydia sent a silent message to him agreeing. "It's too late for Jon. He's lost forever."

"Sam!" Nydia called, as a force gripped her. All present watched her grab the arms of her chair and hold on, mentally fighting the erotic images that darkly clouded her mind.

The silent voice whispered hoarsely to the young woman, bringing back the events of that afternoon. The voice spewed profanely and vividly, carrying with it actual scenes of Nydia and Jon to her mind's eyes. Nydia relived the young man parting her legs and entering her. She groaned as the sensation became real. She again experienced, mentally and physically, his long thick push inward, filling her with pain and pleasure.

Nydia fumbled for Sam's hand and gripped it tightly. He pulled her head to his chest and held her as her mental images spilled over to him. Then the force gripped Sam's mind, and he relived his moments with Janet and Desiree. Their hands and lips on him.

Nydia and Sam first experienced anger at the shared scenes. Then a renewed spirit filled them both and they concentrated on their love for one another.

Love conquered the Dark One's force. The voice and the scenes began dissolving, breaking apart. The voice tapered off into an evil hissing; an angry dark snake, uncoiling and sliding away into the slime that is its home.

Nydia released her grip on Sam's hand. The young couple looked at each other. They were smiling. Nydia said, "We beat it, Sam. We proved we can beat it."

"Love," he said. "The Dark One cannot defeat love. The emotion is disgusting to him." He helped her to her feet. "Come on. Let's go help Father Le Moyne."

"I chose your place because it's away from town and because of the faith I felt when I drew near it," Father Le Moyne explained. "And for other reasons: an exorcism can be very unnerving, and very loud."

The priest looked at Jeanne. She snarled at him. "Mother-fucker!" she hissed.

Father Le Moyne glanced at Joe and Mille. Joe's worst fears had become reality. He was about to take part in this spook stuff. He shuddered.

The priest said, "Mille, would you please bathe the child and dress her in a white gown. Then you and Joe secure her to a bed. Tightly."

Joe and Mille literally dragged the screaming, profane, protesting teenager to a bathroom.

"You're going to have to help me bathe her, Joe," Mille told the man.

"I ain't helpin' bathe no full-growed girl!"

"Get your skinny butt in here!" Mille shouted.

"Lordy, Lordy!" Joe muttered.

"Yeah, come on in, Joe," Jeanne called. "I'll let you finger-fuck me."

"That settles it!" Joe said. "I ain't about to come in there with ya'll."

"I'll help her," Nydia said. "You people put clean sheets on the bed in there," she said pointing.

Mille and Nydia ripped the dirty blouse and jeans from the teenager and bodily tossed her into the shower, along with a bar of soap.

"Scrub it clean, sister!" Mille told her. "Don't make me have to come in there and do it. 'Cause I'll find a scrub brush and peel the hide off of you."

"Goddamn slut!" Jeanne cursed. She then smiled an evil grimace as she felt help on its way. The force entered the bathroom. Jeanne showered quickly and then faced the two women. "You wash me," she said to her sister and Nydia. "Both of you."

The force was stronger than ever before. The two women could do nothing except obey.

Mille and Nydia were in the stall with the teenager. They could not recall taking off their clothes. They could not recall stepping into the large stall. Jeanne fondled Nydia's breasts. She ran her hand over Nydia's belly and dipped downward to caress her.

"No!" Nydia screamed. She slapped the girl, knocking her down in the slippery shower stall.

Nydia pulled Mille from the shower and slapped the woman. She dressed, all the while concentrating on her love for God. "Think of God," she told Mille. "Think only of God."

The combined thoughts of pure good was too much for the force. With an evil hiss, it was gone.

"That was too close for comfort," Mille said. "Thank you, Nydia."

"It will get worse, don't ever believe otherwise. But to fight it, think of love and the Lord."

"Almost got you both that time," Jeanne said. "We'll get you yet."

Nydia tossed the girl a white gown. "Dress!" she said curtly.

They then, with Joe's help, dragged the teenager into a bedroom and tied her down. They joined the others in the den.

"I don't know if this will work," Father Le Moyne said with a long sigh. "I have already violated the first rule by not consulting the bishop. The *Rituale Romanum* is quite clear on that matter. But, perhaps in this case—" He shrugged. "Of the twenty-one heads prefixed in the rite of *Rituale*, I can safely say I meet most of them. I have not fasted, nor have I lived a blameless life. I can but hope that

will be overlooked. I chose not to perform the exorcism in a church for reasons of my own.

"You people—all of you—will act as my witnesses. I cannot allow the Blessed Sacrament near the girl; but I have my crucifix and holy water. I am going into Little Sam's bedroom for a few moments of prayer. Please do not disturb me. When I come out, we must begin immediately."

Father Le Moyne walked softly down the carpeted hall and entered the bedroom. He closed the door behind him.

"Lordy, Lordy!" Joe said. "What in the world is a good Methodist doin' in this mess?"

The quartet walked into the bedroom where Jeanne lay tied, hands to the headboard posts, feet secured to the base of the bed. She was dressed in a white gown of Nydia's. The gown was much too large for the young girl, and she looked pathetic lying on the bed.

Until she opened her mouth.

"Goddamnmotherfuckingcockeatingpussylappingshitfacedassholesuckingba she shouted, the filth rolling from her mouth in waves.

Only Joe had anything to say about that outburst.

"Lordy, Lordy!"

Father Le Moyne entered the room. He was dressed in surplice and violet stole. He said nothing to anyone. He signed himself, Jeanne, and the others with the sign of the cross, then sprinkled them all with holy water. Jeanne thrashed on the bed and screamed in pain as the holy water touched her. She cursed them all. Father Le Moyne ignored her profanity. He placed one end of the violet stole around the neck of Jeanne, securing it. She screamed and hissed and tried to bite his hand. When she saw he was too quick for her snapping teeth, she spat at the priest, her spittle running down his face. Father Le Moyne paid no attention to it. He knelt down by the child, only Mille making the responses required.

Father Le Moyne began praying, his voice rising above the screaming hissing filth coming from the mouth of the teenager.

"You'll all die!" Jeanne howled. "You'll die horribly. I'll see to that, you cock-eaters! I'll see that it takes days for you shits to die."

Father Le Moyne prayed in Latin for a few moments, then switched to English.

"*Fuck you!*" Jeanne shouted, writhing on the bed. "You piss-faced son-of-a-bitch!"

"Oh God," the priest said, "Whose property is ever to have mercy and to forgive: Receive our supplications and prayers, that of Thy mercy and loving-kindness Thou wilt set free this Thy handmaiden who is fast bound by the chain of dark sins."

The priest continued the long prayer, his voice steady, rising over

the howling and screaming of Jeanne. She hissed and cursed and spat at Le Moyne.

The filth from her mouth was staggeringly profane.

"I command thee, whosoever thou art, thou unclean spirit, and all thy companions possessing this child of God, that by the mysteries of the Incantation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the sending of the Holy Ghost, and by the coming of the same our Lord to judgment, thou tell me thy name, the day, and the hour of thy going out, by some sign: and, that to me, a minister of God, although unworthy, thou be wholly obedient in all things: nor hurt this creature of God, or those that stand by, or their goods in any way."

Father Le Moyne signed himself and Jeanne on the forehead, the mouth—being very careful to avoid her flashing teeth—and the breast. Jeanne continued to shriek profanity at the man. The priest began to read from the Holy Gospel, reading from Mark and Luke and John. His voice was low and steady. The room darkened, the lights dimming. All present could feel the presence of both good and evil. A foul odor entered the small bedroom, assailing the nostrils of the believers. Jeanne laughed on the bed and cursed them all.

Father Le Moyne began to pray: "Almighty Lord, Word of God the Father, Jesus Christ, God and Lord of every creature: Who didst give to Thy Holy Apostles power to tread upon serpents and scorpions: Who amongst other of Thy wonderful commands didst vouchsafe to say—Put the devils to flight: By Whose power Satan fell from heaven like lightning: with supplication I beseech Thy Holy Name in fear and trembling—"

A hot stinking wind rose in heavy gusts outside the home, battering the stone walls. A limb was torn from a tree, smashing on the roof and falling like living thunder to the ground. An owl hooked its claws in a window screen and tried to beat its way into the bedroom. Jeanne shrieked and howled and poured verbal filth on the priest. Her gown became dark with heavy sweat.

The priest had never stopped: "—that to me Thy most unworthy servant, granting me pardon of all my faults, Thou wilt vouchsafe to give constancy of faith and power, that shielded the might Of Thy Holy arm, in trust and safety I may approach to attack this cruel devil, through Thee, O Jesus Christ, the Lord our God, Who shalt come to judge the quick and the dead, and the world by fire, Amen."

"Fuck you!" Jeanne shouted. "Fuck all you cock-suckers!" she screamed. "All praise the Master! All praise the Dark One."

Father Le Moyne signed the cross and placed his hand on Jeanne's head, pinning the child's head to the sweat-soaked pillow.

He said, "Behold the Cross of the Lord, flee ye of the contrary part.

The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed—"

"Shove it up your stinking asshole, Zorro!" Jeanne shouted defiantly.

Father Le Moyne appeared undaunted. He continued the exorcism.

The wind slammed against the house. Screaming in his fury, the Dark One hurled the wind like giant fists against the home. The stone structure actually rocked on its foundation. Those inside the house were thrown about like stringless puppets. Only Father Le Moyne appeared not to notice the hard buffeting.

The priest prayed: "Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come unto Thee. The Lord be with you, And with thy spirit."

"*Fuck you!*" Jeanne wailed. She spat on the priest and again tried to bite him, her teeth flashing and snapping in the fading, on and off lights in the bedroom. She screamed profanity of the most hideous proportions.

"O God, and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I call upon Thy Holy Name and humbly implore Thy mercy, that Thou wouldest vouchsafe to grant me help against this, and every unclean spirit, that vexes this Thy creature. Through the same Lord Jesus Christ."

"Fuck me!" Jeanne cried. "Give me some cock, padre. I got good tight pussy, man. Young stuff. Come on! Pop it to me, preacher!" She laughed, the evil rolling from her tongue and shining in her eyes. "Turn me over and stuff it up my ass, you queer son-of-a-bitch. I'll make a man out of you if you'll let me. Let me give you some head, man!"

Laughter, dark and menacing, rose from out of the hot wind and crept into the room.

"Leave!" Father Le Moyne shouted. "Be gone from this holy place, you spawn of the Devil."

The laughter died.

Father Le Moyne crossed himself and began the exorcism. "I exorcise thee, most foul spirit, every coming in of the enemy, every apparition, every legion; in the Name of our Lord Jesus—" He crossed himself. "—Christ, be rooted out, and be put to flight from this creature of God." He signed the cross. "He commands thee, Who has bid thee be cast down from the highest heaven into the lower parts of the earth. He commands thee, Who has commanded the sea, the winds, and the storms. Hear therefore, and fear, Satan, thou injurer of the faith, thou enemy of the human race, thou producer of death, thou destroyer of life, kindler of vices, seducer of men, betrayer of the nations, inciter of envy, origin of avarice, cause of discord, stirrer of troubles: why standest thou, and resistest, when thou knowest that Christ the Lord destroyed thy ways? Fear him, Who was sacrificed in Isaac, Who was sold in Joseph, was slain in the Lamb, was crucified in man, thence was the triumph over hell."

The stinking winds became a fierce howling out of the smoky depths of hell. Tentacles of thick ropelike smoke wound around the ankles of those in the small bedroom, the touch scaly and hot.

"Ignore it," Father Le Moyne told the witnesses.

Jeanne moaned and thrashed on the bed, the ropes binding her, cutting into her wrists and ankles. Drops of blood stained the damp sheet.

Le Moyne signed the Cross. "Depart therefore in the Name of the Father—" he signed the Cross "—and of the Son—" the signing "—and of the Holy—" the signing "—Ghost: give place to the Holy Ghost, this sign of the Holy—" the signing "—Cross of Jesus Christ our Lord: Who with the Father, and the same Holy Ghost, liveth and reigneth ever one God, world without end. Amen."

The wind changed into a low moaning, intermixed with the voices of those condemned to the fiery pits, the flames licking at them, searing forever and ever the flesh of the damned. The ropelike smoke snaked around the room, ankle level, seeking some softening in the faith of those witnessing the exorcism.

All kicked the thick smoke away.

The wind built in fury, all but covering the praying of the priest. Father Le Moyne made three signings on the girl's breast. He touched the girl on the forehead with the sign of the cross.

"I adjure thee, thou old serpent, by the judge of the quick and the dead, by thy Maker, and the Maker of the world: by Him, Who hath the power to put thee into hell, that thou depart in haste from this servant of God, who returns to the bosom of the Church, with thy fear and with the torment of thy terror. I adjure Thee again—" he signed the cross on his forehead "—not in my infirmity, but by the power of the Holy Ghost, that thou go out of this servant of God, whom the Almighty God hath made in His Own Image. *Yield*, therefore, not to me, but to the minister of Christ. For His—"

The howling and the moaning of those confined forever to the smoking heat of the pits became overpowering in volume, covering the priest's words. Still he exorcised the demon from the girl. Those gathered as witnesses could not hear Le Moyne's words but could see only his lips moving. Many times the priest signed the cross, on the chest, the forehead, her arm. Le Moyne raised his voice; he was shouting. Still the howling winds covered his words. But Jeanne was hearing every word in her heart.

The girl's face was a mask of terror and confusion, as she was torn between two worlds, ripped and tossed back and forth between light and darkness, comfort and pain, good and evil. Once she cried, "Oh, God— help me!"

She was slammed backward on the bed as if struck by an invisible

fist. Her mouth became bloody and she soiled herself with urine and excrement. The room stank of human waste and of the odor of burning sulphur.

Again and again, the priest signed the cross, on the girl, on those gathered in the room, and himself. Le Moyne prayed, as the girl alternated between cursing and asking God for help in her battle.

"I therefore adjure thee, thou most foul spirit, every appearance, every inroad of Satan, in the name of Jesus Christ—" the signing "—of Nazareth, Who after His baptism in Jordan, was led into the wilderness, and overcame thee in thine own strong hold: that thou cease to assault her whom He formed from the dust of the earth for His own honour and glory: and that thou in miserable man tremble not at human weakness, but at the image of Almighty God. *Yield, therefore—*"

The room began to pitch as if it possessed a body and brain of its own among the wood and glass and stone. The witnesses were hurled back and forth, all of them grabbing onto dressers, bedposts, closet doors; anything to give them some support.

Jeanne began screaming in fear as her body jerked in uncontrollable spasms of agony on the sweat-soaked bed. No one but God, the girl, and Satan could hear the words from Father Le Moyne's mouth and heart and faith.

The priest was shutting out Satan, and the Dark One was highly irritated.

The bed began to move, jerking back and forth, rocking on its legs, slinging the bound girl from side to side. Stinking vomit erupted from Jeanne's mouth, spraying the priest. Still he calmly invoked the power of God to free the possessed young woman from the black grips of Satan.

The hot winds became of hurricane force, slamming against the house. The window in the bedroom was smashed, glass shattering and spraying those witnessing the departure of the howling fury that possessed Jeanne.

Father Le Moyne was exhausted, as Satan was pounding him with invisible forces as strong as those flailing the young girl. But the priest would not back away from this battle; would not even allow the thought of failure to enter his mind, despite all that Satan was throwing at him. Father Daniel Le Moyne would win this fight.

With God's help.

"There is no time for delay," the priest prayed the final verses of the rite of exorcism. "For behold the Lord the Ruler approaches closely upon thee, and his fire shall glow before him and shall go before him; and shall burn up His enemies on every side. If thou hast deceived man, at God thou canst not scoff: One expels thee, from Whose Sight

nothing is hidden. *He casts thee OUT*, to Whose power all things are subject. He shuts thee out, Who hast prepared for thee and for thine angels everlasting hell; out of Whose mouth the sharp sword shall go out, when He shall come to judge the quick and the dead, and the world by fire.

"Amen."

Father Le Moyne smiled an exhausted smile of victory as the winds abruptly ceased their howlings. The ropelike smoke was gone from the room. The odor of burning sulphur left the room. The demons had ceased their screaming. Jeanne LaMeade lay passively on the stained sheet.

The priest prayed softly for a moment. The room and the bed ceased their movements. The winds had died down to nothing.

Jeanne opened her eyes. They were free of wildness. She looked very confused and very frightened. "Mille!" she called. "What's been happening to me. Where have I been? What—where am I?"

Father Le Moyne put a hand on the girl's face. "You've been in hell, child. But you're home now."

The girl pressed her lips to the palm of the priest's hand and wept.

NINE

Mille bathed her sister and washed and fixed her hair. She found her a T-shirt of Sam's and Jeanne used that for a nightgown. While Mille was tending to Jeanne, Sam and Nydia boarded up the window that had been smashed and cleaned up the room. Then closed the door and locked it. Jeanne stretched out on the sofa in the den and was asleep in a minute.

The adults gathered in the kitchen for coffee. Sam used his handy-talkie and called in to Monty, asking about Little Sam.

"He's been asleep for hours, Sam," Viv told him. "He's such a sweet child. Don't worry about him. He is perfectly safe here."

"We left several changes for him. You've probably found them by now. I don't know whether to risk traveling back to your place tonight. Not this late. I'll see what the others want to do. If we don't call back in, we're staying over here for the night."

"Sam?" Monty took the walkie-talkie. "Don't risk traveling tonight. The students at Nelson College— some of them at least—have gone wild. Roaring up and down the streets, screaming and yelling all sorts of filth. And there are—hell, *things* roaming the darkness. I don't know what in the hell they are. Some of those creatures like the one you shot in the orchard, I guess. But they are accompanied by humans. I've heard the sounds of screaming from time to time. Terrified, agonized screaming. Can you tell me what is going on?"

"Maybe it's the coven members rounding up those who will not swear allegiance to Satan. I don't know, Monty. It could be almost anything. I think it's going to be grim around town in the morning."

Monty exhaled a long sigh. "All right, Sam. We'll see you all in a few hours."

Sam clicked off and looked at his watch. He was startled to see it was past midnight. The exorcism had taken several hours. He turned and faced the group in the kitchen.

"From this moment on," he warned them, "*no one* travels alone or without being armed. With the exception of you, Father Le Moyne. Armed, that is. Unless you feel it's time for you to start carrying a gun."

The priest smiled and held up his cross. "I am armed, Sam."

Sam did not return the smile. He said, "It's past midnight, people. And this marks the week of the Black Sabbat." He looked to Nydia for support. She nodded her head. "All restraints have been removed. Be prepared for anything from coven members. And the undead will be walking the night."

Father Le Moyne thought of his brother and sister-in-law.

Joe shuddered.

In the firmament, the Giver of Life and Light sat with a brooding warrior by His side. "So now it begins," the warrior grumbled.

"The priest speaks with much conviction, does he not?"

"Stop trying to change the subject. *You* are allowed to intervene; why am I not permitted?"

"Patience, Michael, patience. Does the father know of his son's dilemma?"

"Of course. And the mother. The father assisted the boy in some way not too many hours ago. But he did not leave as before," he quickly added, not feeling up to a lecture on the comings and goings of the Elder Sam Balon. "But both mother and father are strangely at peace. If they know fear, they are disguising it well."

"Umm," His voice rumbled. He knew only too well Sam Balon's ability to slip out of the firmament, even though the minister knew full well it was against the rules. "Well, I want you to keep an eye on the father—no! That would be like assigning the fox to guard the henhouse. I'll assign that to someone else."

The warrior chuckled. "The odds are strong against the little band of believers succeeding."

"I am aware of that."

"Still You vacillate in Your decision."

Michael was fixed with a look that on other occasions had caused volcanoes to erupt, floods to occur, sandstorms to whip across the

deserts, and hordes of barbarians to fall to their knees, trembling in fear.

Michael ignored it.

The Giver of All Life muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "One of My better efforts, too."

The warrior merely smiled.

"We will give them a few days," His mighty voice rumbled. "Then I will decide. And I *forbid* you to leave the firmament." Then He thought: Not that My forbidding means one twit to you.

"Bah!" the warrior snorted. He picked up his heavy sword and walked off muttering.

"Really, Michael! There is absolutely no need for armament *here*."

The ageless warrior glanced over his shoulder at the Ruler of all that is Right and Just. "It don't hurt," he called.

Pete LaMeade walked the dark grounds of the cemetery. He carried a shovel in his hand. It was time. He grinned in the night, his footsteps firm on the grass, his destination fixed in his mind.

He reached the gravesite of his wife—dead for more than a year—and began digging at the damp earth. He hummed as he worked.

Marie Fowler encountered Max Oberlin in an alley behind the drug store on main street. They looked at each other for a moment and then grinned. Marie held out her hand and Max took it.

"Thirsty," Max said.

"Yes," Marie replied. "Come. For there are many who are not yet one with us."

The undead walked into the night in search of something to drink.

Dan and Jerry sucked one form of life from the young boy and left him to feel another darker form of unlife renew his body. Soon he would open his eyes and view the world quite differently.

Deputy Vernon Parish ignored the sobbings from his wife and continued raping his daughter. His wife, Susie, tried to struggle out of her bonds. She could not free herself. Vernon, after stripping her naked, had handcuffed her to a bedpost. She could only scream at her husband and the ugliness taking place before her.

Her son entered the bedroom and pushed the father off his sister. The son took the father's place, grunting his way into the young girl.

The mother put her face against the floor and wept. She did not understand what was happening; what had so changed this town.

She just didn't understand.

She looked up as Dan Evans entered the bedroom and dropped his trousers to the floor. She could not believe her ears when her husband

said, "Go ahead and fuck my old lady. Maybe that'll shut her goddamn mouth."

Jon Le Moyne looked at the orgy taking place on the den floor of his house. Patsy was attempting to sexually satisfy five boys at once. Somehow, she was succeeding quite well. But Jon could not see where he had any opening. He padded naked across the floor, his semi-hardness swinging heavy between his legs. A teenage boy looked at Jon, open envy and lust in his eyes. Jon nodded to him. The boys went into a bedroom and closed the door behind them.

Nellie Bennett shouted out her joy as Hoss Patrick filled her. She had not felt this good in several years. She grunted as he slammed his bulk into her. Nellie did not regret making the pact with the Dark One.

Not yet.

Charles and Frances Le Moyne walked the darkened alleyways and back streets of Logandale, mangled and torn from the accident. They looked for Father Le Moyne. They wanted to give him something. They wanted the priest to be as them.

They would find him. If not tonight, then another night. It had been promised them.

Will Gibson sat in his car, Judy beside him. "Are you thirsty?" she asked.

"Yes," Will said, running his swollen tongue over his teeth. "Very."

"Why are we waiting?"

Will started the car and drove into the night, searching.

Janet Sakall knelt between the bare legs of her father and took him orally, while Mayor Kowolski serviced the teenager from behind.

Professors Frank Gilbert and Edie Cash sat in the darkened room at Giddon House with Norman Giddon and Xaviere Flaubert.

"Princess," Edie asked. "Now that Balon knows Desiree is not of our kind, how many days of pleasure are you allowing the members of our coven?"

"Three," the young witch replied. "Until midnight of the twenty-sixth. Thursday night we will cleanse ourselves and meet with our Master. On Friday, the town and all its people will be ours."

"Or dead," Norman said with a profane giggle.

"That is true. Now hear me well: I *must* mate with Sam Balon on Friday night, between six P.M. and midnight. I don't care how it is accomplished; but it must be. I am counting on you to see to that little matter."

"It will be as you order, Princess," Edie said.

"It better be," the young woman replied ominously.

Father John Morton stood guard in his home, a pump shotgun close at hand. His children had gone, leaving the home after cursing both parents, calling them the vilest of names. Tomorrow, or today, he corrected, at first light, he and his wife would go to the Draper home, to join the small group of Christians. The priest wondered what in the world had happened to Byron Price and Richard Hasseling.

Richard Hasseling bumped into something and recoiled in fear. He put out his hand to touch the—thing. He could neither touch it or see it, but somehow, it was there.

"Byron?" he whispered.

"I'm here," Byron returned the whisper. "For the love of God, Richard—let's get out of this awful place."

"I'm trying!" the man replied, his voice ragged from fear. "But we're—we—*we're locked in!*"

"Locked in? What in the hell do you mean, locked in?"

Hasseling took a deep breath and calmed himself. "There appears to be some sort of invisible field around the area. We can't get out!"

Methodist shoved Baptist out of the way. He lunged toward the invisible barrier and smacked his head hard. He stumbled backward and sat down heavily on the ground. "Son-of-a-bitch!" he muttered. He looked heavenward. "Forgive me, Lord."

"I think," Hasseling said slowly and softly, "that at first light, we had best rejoin the group at Chief Draper's house."

"I concur. But for now, we'd better stay here and stay quiet."

Hasseling sat down on the ground beside his friend. "Byron? I've a confession to make. I'm scared half out of my wits."

Byron peered through the murk at the man. Byron had come very close to becoming a street punk in Buffalo before joining the church and straightening up his act. For a moment, he reverted back to the streets. "Well, Richard," he said. "Join the fucking club!"

And Pete LaMeade's shovel struck the top of his wife's coffin. Pete broke the seal and lifted the lid. He looked at the rotting grinning face. Lisa LaMeade opened her eyes and gazed up at her husband. Pete lifted her head and pressed his mouth to her decaying lips.

"Come, *Ma jolie*," he whispered against the stink of her face. "You are free."

BOOK THREE

We will have no truce or parley with you, or the grisly gang who work your wicked will. You do your worst—and we will do our best.

—Churchill

ONE

MONDAY

Noah had taken a chance and driven out to Sam and Nydia's. He now stood in the den, looking at Sam's collection of guns. "No doubt about it, Sam. You have quite an impressive arsenal here."

"That you can see," Sam replied with a boyish grin. "Take whatever suits you. For I don't believe you will be allowed to leave the town if you tried returning to your house for weapons."

"I'm certain you are correct in that," Noah replied. He selected a twelve gauge shotgun and began filling a sack with shells.

Sam opened the back of his gun case and pulled out an AK-47. The AK-47 is almost universally accepted as the best combat rifle ever made.

Noah looked at the AK. He arched one eyebrow. "My word. Is that —"

"Yes," Sam replied. "Full auto." He went to a storage room and returned, carrying a full case of 7.62 ammunition and several canvas pouch belts.

Noah arched the other eyebrow. "In New York State, too," he muttered. "You really do like to live dangerously, don't you, Sam?"

"No, not really. I just believe it is the right of any law-abiding citizen to own any weapon they might choose to own. I think limits should only apply to howitzers, land mines, and weapons of that nature."

"My sentiments, exactly, Sam," the writer said.

Sam sat down on the couch and began filling clips. Noah sat beside him, filling a canvas loop belt with double ought buckshot shells.

Using the handy-talkie, Nydia contacted the Drapers, speaking with Viv. She clicked off and said to Sam, "Little Sam is all right. Sam—what are we going to do?"

Without looking up from his work, Sam said, "We're going to gather

up every weapon I have and every weapon Monty owns, and all the ammunition and food we can steal. That's first. Then we are going—all of us—out to Fox Estate and make them come to us. That mansion is built of native rock; they won't be able to burn us out or starve us out. I think, I believe, that if we can hold out until midnight of the thirty-first, we'll be home free. Sometime between Thursday and Saturday, I may have to enter the Giddon House and try to find and destroy the Tablet of Satan."

"The Tablet?" Father Le Moyne asked.

"There is a Tablet that belongs to the Devil. It is inscribed: 'HE WALKS AMONG YOU. THE MARK OF THE BEAST IS PLAIN. BELIEVE IN HIM. ONCE TOUCHED, FOREVER HIS. THE KISS OF LIFE AND DEATH.' It is said that if the Tablet is destroyed, that person will have some control over the actions of Satan. My father attempted to destroy it. He was killed. Maybe I'll have better luck." (The Devil's Kiss)

"And the Tablet is covered with obscene drawings, cut into the stone?" Noah asked.

"Why—yes," Sam said, looking at him. "Why—how did you know that?"

"I was afraid that was the Tablet you were referring to. I did a great deal of research on the Dark One. I discovered some small reference to the Tablet in an old obscure book. How did you know about the power over Satan supposedly given to the mortal who destroys the Tablet?"

Sam shook his head. "I—I didn't, Noah. Not until just then."

"And your father? Did he know?"

"I don't know. I get the feeling he might have, toward the end."

Mille entered the den, her sister with her, holding onto her hand. Jeanne looked fresh and innocent, her eyes reflecting a renewed spirit and inner strength.

"I lived through a nightmare," the teenager said, speaking softly. "But thanks to all of you, I'm O.K. I want to thank you, all of you."

Father Le Moyne rose and put a gentle hand on Jeanne's shoulder. "All that is behind you now, Jeanne. For now, we must look to the future."

Joe came into the den, walked to the gun cabinet, and picked out a Remington Model 870 Bushmaster with a twenty inch barrel. "I got me a good rifle out in the car. This here will do for close work." He looked at Sam. "You got plenty of shells for this?"

"All we'll need to hold up the sporting goods store and get some more," Sam said grinning.

Joe also grinned. He shook his head in disbelief. "I been a cop for more years than I like to think about. Now I get to operate from the other side of the fence. Should be interestin'."

"Let's start loading up the cars and trucks, people," Sam said. He walked over to the coffee table and picked up the handy-talkie to call Monty and tell him they were on their way.

The telephone rang, startling them all. Sam picked up the receiver. It hummed for a few seconds, then clicked, a voice taking the place of the hum. "You will all die," a man said. "And you will die slowly and painfully, and with much humiliation. Turn on your TV set to the early local news." The voice was gone. The phone went dead.

"Something up?" Joe asked.

"Yeah. And I bet you I know what it is." Sam walked to the TV set and flipped it on, turning to the channel that carried news of local interest to that area the station served.

"—And in news of interest to the residents living in Clark County, especially those who might be considering travel on routes 12B, 12C, or 467, in a word—don't! Those routes have all been closed for one week, effective at six this morning. All you folks up there in Logandale—*good luck!* The mayor of Logandale, Abe Kowalski, told this reporter the folks in his town have been stockpiling food and other essentials for several weeks, preparing for this event. Most say they are looking forward to it. The clinic there is fully equipped and fully manned—*whoops!* Excuse me, ladies. Fully *personed*, that should be. Sorry about that. Anyway, the clinic is prepared to handle any emergency that might arise. The sheriff of Clark County, Pat Jenkins, says medivac helicopters from the hospital in Blaine will be on twenty-four hour alert to handle any situation that might occur. We hope there will not be any of those. So to all those folks up there in Logandale with the pioneer spirit—may the Force be with you."

Sam clicked off the set. "Hell of a choice of words," he said. "Cheerful son-of-a-bitch doesn't realize just how accurate he was."

"Kowalski's lyin' through his dentures," Joe said. "He didn't tell Monty or me about any damn closin' of roads around this area."

"Of course not," Sam said. "The mayor is one of them. But it makes me more certain I'm right about the coven members' plans. I had a hunch—no, that's not it. I guess Dad must have told me. I don't think they're going to wait until the thirty-first. I think the timetable's been altered. I think Saturday night is their deadline. I don't know how I know that. I just do. And I think, from what Satan told me, after he kicked me in the butt and just before he pissed on me, that they're going to play with us for a time. Then they'll try to panic us. But they're going to have a hell of a time doing that if we're bunkered in tight."

"Let's get to it, folks," Joe said. "We got a lot of work to do."

"I got the same call you did," Monty told Sam. "We all heard the

news. No telling how long all this has been in the works." He shook his head. "Stick up the sporting goods store, Sam? Steal guns and food and ammunition? I don't know about that."

Sam was mildly amused at the cop in the man. "You think we can just walk into the place and buy what we're going to need, Monty?"

Monty opened his mouth to argue. Before he could speak, there was a knock on the door. Noah opened it and looked into the faces of Father John Morton and his wife, with Byron Price and Richard Hasseling in tow.

"Have the doubting Thomases reversed their positions on the matter of Satan?" Noah asked, waving the group inside.

"Please don't rub our mistakes raw, Mr. Crisp," Richard said. "Believe me when I say that you are looking at a very confused group of people."

"Call me Noah. And you're right. I am sorry for the unwarranted sarcasm. But the past night has been rather harrowing for all of us."

Viv took Barbara Morton's hand and led her into the kitchen for coffee. Richard and Byron told the group of their experience with the invisible shield covering the area. Byron pointed to the knot on his head.

"I lost both my faith and my temper out there," the man admitted. "Several times. But I rediscovered both, never fear."

Sam came right to the point. "Can either of you men use any type of weapon? Rifle, pistol, or shotgun?"

Father John Morton and Richard Hasseling had had some experience with rifles and shotguns when in their teens. But neither had fired a gun in years. Byron was city born and reared and had never fired a gun in his life.

Shit! Sam thought. Another argument for compulsory military training. "Well, you'll just have to learn. A very few of us will have to be covering a lot of ground, and all of us will have to man a perimeter. Let's get to it, people."

The small caravan of Christians made their way slowly into the main part of Logandale. There was not a living soul on the sidewalks when they began the move, but all were conscious of being watched from the houses. Each window seemed to contain an evil face. Each vehicle was equipped with a Logandale P.D. handy-talkie and they kept in constant touch. Each person knew the agenda.

First the sporting goods store for guns and ammunition. The big supermarket on the edge of town for supplies was second. The Catholic church was next for holy water. The service station on the way out of the main part of town was fourth. There they would top off their tanks to be ready for the run for safety. Fifth was the dash for

Fox Estate.

Sam led the way in his pickup. Nydia, in her car, with Little Sam and Mille followed him. Mille's pistol was in her hand. And Joe had told Sam that he had no doubts as to Mille's reaction if trouble began. She would shoot first and ask questions later. Desiree and Jeanne rode with John and Barbara Morton. Fourth in the parade was Richard Hasseling and Byron Price. Noah rode with them, his .357 in his hand. Monty and Viv were fifth. Father Le Moyne drove the last vehicle, with Joe riding shotgun.

These, then, were the only organized humans in Logandale opposing the forces of the Dark One.

"Look over there," John said to his wife and Jeanne and Desiree. He pointed.

A naked man had been tortured and then nailed alive over the door of his house. The nails had been driven through his hands, his sides, and his feet. He had died horribly.

Those in the small caravan began to see other sights of horror. A teenager hanging from a tree limb; a woman tied to a chain link fence and whipped to death; the pastor of a small church, crucified.

"Now you people can better understand what we're up against," Sam radioed. "Look at it and don't forget it. We're dealing with rabid animals, not thinking human beings."

As they approached the main street of the small town, they began seeing people leave homes to line both sides of the street, to stand silently and sullenly watching the passing group of Christians. None of the people of Satan made any attempt to stop or to interfere in any way with the movement of the caravan. Several of the Devil worshippers gave the Christians obscene gestures; one man urinated in the gutter as they passed. A woman with a huge dildo in one hand lifted it and shouted to Joe Bennett what she was going to do with the object; and where in his anatomy she was going to shove it.

"Not up mine, you ain't," Joe muttered. "I bet that'd smart some."

Father Le Moyne signed the cross in the woman's direction. She gave the priest the middle finger, waving it at him. Father Le Moyne struggled within, resisting the urge to return the gesture. With both hands.

"Forgiveness," Father Le Moyne muttered. "Always forgiveness. Remember that God is Love, and vengeance is His alone."

"Not in this case, Father," Joe told him. "Go ahead and shoot her the bird. I guarantee you, it'll make you feel a lot better."

"You're probably right, Joe," Father Le Moyne admitted. "It would appease the human side of me. But that is not my function here on earth."

"Then I'll do it for you." Joe extended the middle finger of his right

hand toward the woman.

The woman, who used to be a member of the Methodist church, Joe recalled, hunched her hips in his direction and shouted curses at him. "Bitch!" Joe muttered, watching the woman in the side-view mirror.

There was not a shop, store, or business open anywhere in Logandale. It was a dead town, Sam thought. In more ways than one. The caravan pulled to a halt in front of the closed sporting goods shop. Parked directly across the street, the three policemen who had supposedly resigned the Logandale P.D. were in a police car, watching the small procession. The three men got out of the car and began walking across the street toward Sam's pickup.

"You there!" Jim Peters called to Sam. "Get out of that truck and raise your hands."

The window down, Sam said, "What have I done?"

"Just get out of the goddamn truck and keep your fucking mouth shut!" Bob Carson told him.

Sam stepped out of the truck and raised the AK., the weapon on full auto. "Stop right there," he told the three men. "If I have to repeat it, you're dead meat in the street. Understand?"

The men halted their advance. They seemed disoriented and unsure of what to do. Carl Medley finally spoke. "All right, don't shoot."

"Remove your gunbelts and lay them in the street," Sam ordered. "Then step away from them, to your right, and lay down in the street. Belly down and arms and legs spread wide. Do it and don't move."

The trio belly down on the concrete, Monty gathered up their sidearms and then opened the trunk of the police car, removing two riot guns. The ex-chief put those in his car. He looked at Sam.

"Kick in the door of the sporting goods store and you and Noah gather up every gun in there and all the ammunition you find. Divide it out among the cars. Get tarps, survival gear, knives, rope, lanterns and fuel, axes, dehydrate food, and anything else you see you think we might need. For we might have to take to the timber before this is all over. Let's move it."

Monty did not hesitate. There was no doubt in his mind now that this was anything other than pure survival of the best prepared. But he still had doubts as to the need for any killing. That would come home to him later. Monty kicked in the front door of the store, smashed the lock with the butt of his rifle, and with Noah right behind him, entered the shop.

From far up the street, Sam could hear the crowd gathering in strength. They were slowly marching toward the center of town. They were chanting a strange intonation in a language Sam did not understand.

But he knew what it represented.

"Shake it up there!" Sam called. "John, you and Richard and Byron help out. Move it, we don't have much time."

The ministers, frightened looks on their pale faces, jumped from their cars and ran into the sporting goods store and started a modern day fire bucket line, passing down cases and crates and bags of supplies.

"Joe!" Sam called. "Take my truck and get to the church and then the supermarket. Start loading up with food and bottled water. You know what to get. I'll take your car. Nydia, you and Mille go with him in your car. You two stand guard. Take off!"

The ominous chanting of the swelling crowd was growing in volume. Sam checked his AK to see it was still on full auto. "Looks like I get to open this dance," he muttered. "So let's get on with it."

Sam stepped out into the street. "One more minute!" he called into the store. He shifted the AK to combat arms and got ready.

"We'll make it!" Noah returned the shout. "You just give us that minute, Sam."

The chanting was growing louder, the words hateful and evil in the strange tongue. The first column of marchers swung around the corner. They were less than a block away, shouting the evil.

Sam lifted the muzzle of the AK and burned half a clip in their direction.

The rhythmic chanting changed to screaming as the slugs tore into flesh and bone. Three men and a woman flopped on the street, howling in pain. A man and a woman lay still, their faces torn apart by the 7.62 ammo. The crowd turned into a panicked mob, each person trying to shove the other out of the way, seeking refuge from the hail of automatic weapon fire. Behind Sam, men were racing in and out of the sporting goods store, throwing arm loads of goods into cars.

"Let's go!" Sam shouted. "We're all out of time." He burned the rest of the clip at the retreating backs of Satan's followers, dropping three more bodies onto the concrete. He changed clips and blew out a store window on the corner of the block, sending glass and brick chips and lead flying. The caravan was moving, tires protesting on the street as the small group of Christians raced away.

They slid into the parking lot of the big supermarket. Like the sporting goods store, it, too, had been closed. The front doors of the supermarket were shattered. Joe had blown them open with his slug gun. Cases and boxes of food and jugs of bottled water were stacked in front of the big store.

"Everybody!" Sam yelled. "Out of the cars and start helping out."

"We got what Father Le Moynes wanted from the church," Joe panted. "I heard shootin'. You get a few of them?"

"Half a dozen or so. I left the cops in the middle of the street."

"Should have shot them," Joe said with a grunt. "Be three less to have to deal with later on."

"I would have if the civilians hadn't been watching me." Already Sam's mind was separating soldiers from civilians; warriors from recruits; noncombatants from fighters.

Then there was no more time for conversation as all bent their backs loading supplies into the cars and trucks of the caravan.

When they had loaded all they could, the caravan moved out. They were meeting no further resistance. The Satan worshippers had been routed, but all knew the lull would not last for long. And the next encounter between them would find the followers of the Dark One well armed and ready and willing for a fight.

They filled their tanks at a service station, after breaking in the doors, turning on the electricity, and unlocking the pumps. They pulled out for Fox Estate. Halfway there, they found the road blocked by heavy trucks.

"Rabble!" Princess Flaubert hissed her anger, the words coming from her mouth like a snake uncoiling. "Cowardly rabble, all."

"They thought it would be easy taking the Christians, Princess." Norman Giddon attempted to sooth the young woman. "They did not know—nor did I—that Sam Balon would open fire on unarmed men and women."

"Well, they should have been warned!" Xaviere snapped. Her words cracked like tiny whips. "Sam Balon is just like his father. God's personal killers. That's all. They must *not* reach Fox Estate. You will see to that. Now get out!" she screamed at him.

Norman Giddon, trembling from fear, slinked from the room much like a whipped dog.

"God's personal killers," the old warrior said, his voice rumbling across the firmament. "I think it has a nice ring to it, don't You?"

But the Ruler of the Heavens did not find His friend's remarks amusing. He glared at him.

The warrior refused to be intimidated, just as he had been doing for more years than would be imaginable for humans to comprehend. "You began it all, remember? You could have just as easily killed the Son of the Morning, you know. Then all this would have been prevented."

"I would rather you not refer to that filth as the 'Son of the Morning.' Please."

"Pardon me. Shall we have it stricken from the Bible? Gutenberg is somewhere around this area, I believe."

"You try My patience, old warrior. But I am not deceived by your

actions. You're attempting to anger Me so I will order you from the firmament. Then you could meddle in Earth's business. I know all your tricks, Michael, and you should be ashamed."

"Should be, perhaps," the ageless warrior replied. "But I am not."

"All that violence," He muttered.

"You are concerned about the violence in one insignificant little village when the entire planet of Earth is exploding in war daily? I—"

"Speaking of that!" the voice thundered.

"Am I about to get another lecture concerning the Middle Eastern portion of that planet?"

"Yes. You meddled."

The warrior sighed and prepared himself for a scolding. But he was used to it. It had been occurring for thousands of years.

And had not deterred him from single action.

"I know a shortcut," Noah shouted. "Back up and follow me."

The column backtracked, following where Noah drove. He cut off the county road onto a dirt road and roared around the gravel curves, the rear end of the vehicles fishtailing in the loose gravel. They angled back toward the highway, finally bouncing onto the road, north of the blockade. The caravan headed for Fox Estate. Homes were fewer in this part of Logandale, but much more expensive.

They drove past the Giddon House and cut into the curving drive of Fox Estate. They had accomplished the first leg of their journey.

Sam saw Jimmy Perkins shuffle from the rear of the house and run for the thick brush and timber to the rear of the estate. Sam jumped from his pickup and triggered off a long burst from his AK. The slugs hit Perkins in the back, knocking the undead sprawling. The others watched in amazement as the man jumped to his feet and ran into the timber, apparently unhurt from the lead that stitched his back.

"But you hit him!" Monty yelled. "It was a good hit. I saw the slugs dot the back of his shirt. But—Jesus! There was no blood!"

"Bullets won't kill him," Sam explained calmly. Monty stood with an astonished look on his face. "Jimmy Perkins has been dead for almost a quarter of a century."

"What?" Monty yelled the question. "That's not possible, Sam."

"Oh, it's possible. I'll tell you about it later. Let's get this gear into the house. Joe? Check out the house. If there is anybody in there—kill them."

"With pleasure," Joe drawled.

TWO

"Put the vehicles in the big garage around back," Sam told the group. "Secure the garage doors with chains and locks. Find some

boards and nails and make damn sure what you build is sturdy enough to keep people out. We're going to be needing those vehicles. When that is done, start going over the nomenclature of the weapons of your choice. You've got to learn how to use them. And we don't have much time to teach you people."

Sam then prowled the big house, inspecting each room. He forced himself to enter the bedroom where he and Desiree had made love. He stood for a few moments, feeling the dark force attempt to cloud his mind and wriggle like a snake into his rational thinking process. Sam fought the Dark One's mental manipulations and smiled victoriously as they fought back each mental thrust from Satan.

"You can't get to me that way," Sam said aloud. "Not anymore. Never again. Not to me, not to Nydia, not to Father Le Moyne, not to Noah. So leave me alone."

"You didn't mention the others, though, did you?" the sinister voice whispered in Sam's head. "Oh, no. Because you can't be sure of them, can you?"

"How can I be?" Sam questioned.

"Then I'll just be on my merry way," the voice spoke cheerfully. "All my magic to perform. Ta-ta, Mr. Balon."

Sam felt the force leave the room. He left swiftly and located Father Le Moyne.

"Satan just attempted to influence my thoughts," he told the priest. "Upstairs. When he found he could not do so, he suggested the others who did not have our faith. He's going to try to shape their thoughts."

"Mille and Joe will stand firm. So will Jeanne. I'm certain the ministers will do the same. I can't be certain about Monty or Viv, Desiree. We'll have to keep close watch on them. I—am hesitant to tell them of Satan's plans. It might prove detrimental; make them so nervous they would be vulnerable to his influence."

"So all we can do is watch?"

"I'm afraid so."

Sam left the priest and continued his inspection of the huge mansion. He saw Barbara Morton sitting alone in a small drawing room. She lifted her eyes from the Bible she was reading and looked at the young man.

"We'll make it," Sam assured her. He could tell the woman was badly frightened. "I won't tell you not to be afraid; that would be foolish. But I can tell you with enough faith, we can make it through this thing."

Barbara was a very pretty woman. In her late thirties, Sam guessed. A knockout when in high school or college, he thought. Cheerleader type. Big blue eyes, soft honey-colored hair, very fair complexion. And a good figure, too. She looked like the picture of a Southern girl. Sam

said as much, trying to take her mind off their present danger.

"I'm originally from Tennessee," she told him. Sam picked up just the faintest trace of an accent. "I met John in college. Cambridge. He used to kid me because I never took the Devil very seriously. I used to laugh at horror movies. You know, about possession and Devil worship—things like that. John would never watch the shows. He said it was just too real for his tastes."

"And now?"

She met his gaze. "It's—real enough. John told me all about you. He's spoken at length with Noah and Father Le Moyne. You're quite a young man, Sam Balon."

Sam shrugged off the compliment. "I did what I had to do, Mrs. Morton. Just like now—with all of us here. We're doing what has to be done."

"Barbara, please. And I think you're being much too modest, Sam."

Sam began picking up vibes; and he didn't much like the message in the silent pulsations. "All right. Barbara it is, then."

She closed her Bible, laid it aside, and stood up. A very good figure. Sam readjusted his original estimate of the woman. But something in the woman's eyes sent warning signals flashing in Sam's brain.

"I'm so frightened, Sam," she said. Her voice was small in the room.

Just as she stepped toward the young man, Joe called from the foyer. The shout was faint in the huge mansion.

"Excuse me, Barbara," Sam said. "You just take it easy. Everything will be all right. Bet on it. And," he added as an afterthought, pointing at her Bible on the table, "keep your faith."

Sam was relieved to be leaving the woman's presence. Barbara Morton was disturbing to him. Sam said as much to Joe.

"She spreads her legs from time to time," the man informed him in a low voice. "But she's real discreet about it. She don't give it away to just anybody."

"The *priest's* wife!" Sam was shocked and made no attempt to hide it.

"Yeah. She's human, Sam. 'Way I get the story, she likes more action between the sheets than her husband does. But she tries to be faithful to him. But John has what the doctors call a low sex drive. Barbara's in high gear all the time. But when that woman kicks it into overdrive, look out, 'cause she's gonna find her a man and get him in the saddle for some hard ridin'."

Sam stood for a moment, shaking his head. "Well, that tells me something then. I could swear Barbara was coming on to me in there."

"That don't surprise me none, Sam. She's one we're gonna have to keep an eye on. I just spoke with Father Le Moyne," he explained. "He told me what you told him 'bout the Devil and all."

"Joe, has the—have you heard any strange voices in your head?"

Joe smiled. "No. I think Old Lucifer knows to leave me alone. I think he knows none of his whisperin' would do a damn bit of good far as I'm concerned. I ain't the most Christian feller in the world; I've sinned—mostly with women. And I have asked for His forgiveness. Don't get me wrong, Sam. I *never* messed around none on any of my wives. All my sinnin' was done before marriage or in between wives. But I never lied nor stole or anything like that. I just don't hold with that sort of doin's. I wasn't raised that-a-way."

And Sam knew then that Joe might be killed by a bullet or knife; he was mortal. But Satan would never sway him by temptation.

"You're a good man, Joe."

"I'm just a man. No better or no worse than most others. Reason I called for you was to tell you 'bout that preacher's wife. But you done put all that together. She's a real looker, Sam. That there is what you'd have to call prime. We'll both watch her close. I think she's a good person in her heart. But to put it bluntly: she just likes to fuck, and that sums it up."

Sam laughed at the man's frankness of speech and continued his inspection of the huge mansion. The field of fire the house afforded was excellent. There was no doubt in Sam's mind they could be overrun by the sheer numbers—if Satan chose to go that route; but Sam did not believe the coven members would be allowed to do that. Too much danger of Nydia, Little Sam, and himself being killed. And he knew Satan had plans for the three of them. So it would be a war of nerves for a couple of days, maybe longer. Satan would attempt to lure the Christians into his camp with mental manipulations. Then, when that failed—and Sam hoped it would fail—only then would a lot of deadly force be used.

He hoped his assessment was correct.

"Sam?" Joe called from the downstairs.

Sam stepped to the balcony's edge and looked down. "Right here, Joe."

"That there Flaubert woman wants to talk to you." Joe pronounced it *Flourburt*. "She's waitin' by the gate at the stone fence, on the Giddon side of the line. You be careful, now. I don't trust that bitch."

My daughter, Sam thought. "All right. Coming down." My daughter. And the daughter of the Devil. And I know I will have to kill her someday. If I can, that is.

Sam carefully checked his weapons. Nydia met him at the side door of the mansion, in the kitchen. "You be careful, Sam," she said, kissing him. "It's a sure bet that while Xaviere is your child, she'll try to lure you into her bed to produce another demon child."

"Tell you what," Sam said with a grin. "Any genealogist who ever tries to trace this family tree will be a sure bet for the funny farm

when he's through."

She matched his grin, kissed him again, and gently pushed him toward the door.

"My dear Sam," Xaviere said. She was standing by the gate that was the only opening between the two estates. The gate was locked and chained. She spoke through the heavy steel bars. "Or would you prefer I called you Daddy?"

"You'll be calling me a lot of things before this ordeal is over, Xaviere."

Her laughter was loud and evil, mocking Sam. "I suppose so, Sam. We all watched you and Desiree. You're very well endowed, Sam. I am looking forward to your making love to me at some later date. Poor Desiree. I had no idea she was a virgin."

Sam said nothing. He continued to stare at the young woman through the steel bars.

"And young Jon Le Moyne had quite a time with Nydia, did he not? The boy is almost a freak in the sex department. But your wife certainly seemed to enjoy it."

"It won't work, Xaviere," Sam said. "Give it up."

"No, Sam. *You* give it up. It would be the wisest move for you to make. I'll make a pact with you, *Daddy*. Plant your seed in me and I'll let all of you leave. I give you my word that you all will be allowed to leave in safety."

"No deal," Sam said flatly. "I won't make deals with you or Satan."

She smiled at him. Licked her lips. "Am I that unattractive, Sam?"

"You know you're not, Xaviere. But I wouldn't fuck you with Satan's dick."

She flushed with anger, then caught her emotions and held them in check. She forced a smile. "How crude, Sam. But I won't accept your answer. Not until you have had the time to think it over. For the consequences will be—ah—well, unpleasant, to say the least."

"I can imagine."

"No," Xaviere said softly. "No, Sam. I don't believe you can. I know you went through much at Falcon House. But this time is entirely different. You're on your own. No outside help. Let me give you an example. I will order the Catholic priest to be slowly crucified; the priest of the Episcopal church will be raped, by men, in full view of you all. I shall have the prissy little writer skinned alive. That should prove quite amusing, *oui*, Sam?"

"Go on, Xaviere, act out your fantasies. Have a ball running your mouth."

"Oh, they are not fantasies, dear Sam. I assure you of that. Now let me see—where was I? Ah! I shall have the Baptist minister become a

Beast; the Methodist to be beaten into submission and forced to become my slave. Mille I shall give to the men of the coven. Monty, I shall—"

"All right, Xaviere," Sam said, with a curt slash of his hand. "All right. I get your point. All sorts of dire and perverted acts lay in store for us. I'll relay your messages to the others."

She looked at him oddly. "Yes, I believe you will. Honesty. That queer Christian trait. Do tell them, Sam. But please remember, the only way to prevent their torture and abuse is to give me your seed."

"I'll pass the word along. That all you have to say to me, Xaviere?"

"You can't win, Sam. Not this time. Neither your God nor His warrior will interfere this time. And your God has forbidden your earth father to take a hand. You are alone. You and your pitiful little band of weak-sister Christians. It is now ten-thirty." She did not look at her watch but Sam did not dispute her word. "You will have until six o'clock this evening to reach a decision. After that—" She shrugged. "What will be, will be."

Sam grinned. "Yeah. I saw that old movie on TV some years ago."

"What!"

"Never mind. All right, Xaviere, I'll deliver the good word from you. Anything else?"

"Nothing. Except do not be foolish, Sam. You've put yourself into a box at the Fox Estate. I don't know why you did it. But it is done. And you cannot undo it. Believe this, Sam: You cannot, you *will not* be allowed to leave. Not unless my conditions are met. Goodbye, Sam. We shall be seeing each other again—very soon."

"Yes. I'm rather certain of that, Xaviere. Wish I could say I looked forward to it."

He watched her walk away, disappearing into the Giddon House. He had tried to see himself in any part of the young woman, but could not. It was almost impossible for him to believe she was of his seed. But she was. He walked back into the mansion and gathered everybody in the large study. There, he told them, word for word, what Xaviere had told him.

There were a number of oohhs and aahhs and one or two "gross-out!" and several cuss words. Richard asked, "Do you think she means it, Sam?"

"Every word of it, Richard. Don't any of you doubt it for a second. Those people are unparalleled when it comes to savagery and cruelty. They enjoy it."

"If she were to become impregnated by your seed, Sam," Monty asked, "what would the—baby be?"

"A demon-child," Noah told him. "But Xaviere would not die birthing it, as Roma did. But just as Xaviere is, the child could not be

killed. It would be a pure spawn of Satan. And just as Xaviere will, the child would live forever."

"A demon cannot be killed?" Joe asked. "How come that is?"

"They can't be killed by a mortal," Father Le Moyne told him. "Not unless the mortal is blessed." He looked at Sam in an odd way.

Sam did not catch the strange look.

"So what is going to happen to us, and when?" Viv asked.

"For the next couple of days," Sam replied, "my guess would be nothing much. It will be a battle of nerves, mostly. Satan will attempt to sway you with whispered promises, promises of all sorts of things. He'll try to tempt you, play on your weaknesses, anything to make you fall from grace. When that fails, then they use force." He shrugged his muscular shoulders. "But I could be wrong. The coven members might try to beat down the front door tonight. We're just going to have to be very careful and stay alert at all times."

"Let's get some lunch," Nydia suggested. "We could all use a good meal. And this afternoon, we'll take shifts resting. It's the night we have to fear."

"They're out there, aren't they?" Monty asked. He stood beside Sam, in a large room facing the road that ran in front of the mansion. Night had wrapped its cloak over the land, and the gathering purple was deep.

"Yes," the young man replied. "Watching. Waiting for us to make some sort of mistake. But they haven't set foot on this property. Not yet."

"I wonder why they haven't."

"I don't know."

A pitiful howling moan reached the ears of those in the mansion. The sound was that of a human being who had reached the end of his endurance, before sliding off into death or insanity.

"What in God's name was that?" Monty asked.

"They're torturing people." Sam's response was bluntly offered. "Get used to it. You're going to hear a lot of it before this is over."

The voice shrieked once more, the awful yowling of pain ending with a hideous tapering bubble of agony. The sounds of hammering reached the mansion.

Footsteps came up softly behind the two men. They turned to face Father Le Moyne.

"I wonder what they are building in the dead of night?" the priest asked.

"Crosses would be my guess," Sam replied. "They're crucifying people."

Father Le Moyne signed the cross and bent his head for a moment.

He sighed deeply and shook his head in disgust and sorrow. "I wish there were something we could do for those poor people in torment."

"Hey, the house!" A man's harsh voice cut the night. The man was speaking through a bullhorn. "We got Old Man Fontaine all nailed up proper. We're makin' bets as to how long he'll last 'fore his heart quits on him. Any of you folks want to buy into the bettin'?"

"There is no limit to man's inhumanity to his fellow man," Father Le Moyne said. "Not when Satan is at the helm of the ship."

"Oh, God, it hurts!" a girl's voice cried into the deep night. "For the love of God, somebody please help me. I can't stand the pain." She screamed piteously. "No!" she wailed. "Not there!" Then she screamed, again and again, the voice soon becoming hoarse as it continued to push out of the young throat, straining in agony.

"It could well be a trick," Sam cautioned the others. "Janet pulled the same thing up in Canada, at Falcon House. Nydia and I thought she was being brutally raped. But it was all just a show for our ears."

Monty curtly nodded his head in the direction of the howling. "But what if that is not an act? What if that is the real thing?"

"Then she is having a bad time of it," Sam said, a coldness to his words. "What would you suggest we do?"

Monty's shoulders slumped. "I—don't know, Sam. But I can't take much more of that poor girl's screaming. It's getting to me."

"It's getting to us all, Monty. But we can't afford to do anything rash or foolish. We can't afford to lose anybody. There are too few of us compared to many of them. And it's going to get worse; much worse. Believe it."

Monty turned away and walked into the center of the mansion without replying. His back was stiff with pent-up anger and frustration.

Sam knew exactly how the man felt.

"What is being done to that poor girl?" Father Le Moyne asked.

Despite himself, Sam was growing weary of the constant barrage of questions. He held his temper in check and said, "Probably being raped and sodomized, Father."

Sam walked away, leaving the priest alone with his prayers. The screaming was getting to Sam, as well.

DAWN. TUESDAY.

First light found the small group of Christians haggard and mentally worn. The screaming, howling, and painful shrieking and the dirty laughter and shouts of obscenities had picked up during the night and continued without abatement until the first faint touches of light filtered past the dark.

Telling the others to stay inside, Sam went outside for a look-

around.

The day was cloudy, with low-hanging clouds, gray and black, threatening to spill rain at any moment.

A short scream of fright stopped Sam. "Oh, my God!" he heard Barbara say. "Look over there! It's horrible!"

Sam turned, the AK on full auto, off safety. The body of a naked man hung by a rope over the stone fence to the west of the mansion. The noose was around his neck, his face horribly swollen, blackened tongue sticking out of his mouth. He had been tossed over the fence sometime during the night and slowly strangled.

"Monty!" Sam called. "Come on. I need your help. The rest of you stay in the house." He looked up at the second level of the mansion. Joe stood watching him from a window. "Give me some eyes on the west side, Joe," he called. "Just in case."

"Gotcha," Joe returned the call. He disappeared from view.

Sam walked toward the dead man. He recognized him as the minister of a small church in Logandale. He could not recall the man's name or the church. The man had been hideously tortured. Strange markings covered his naked body, cut deeply into once living flesh. Blood streaked down his inner thighs from the horrible wounds where his testicles and penis had been hacked off.

Monty reached Sam's side. He wore a sidearm and carried a Remington Model Six, .308 caliber. "Dan Abbott," Monty said. "Pastored that little Baptist church over on Davidson Street. I didn't know him very well. Seemed like a decent man, though."

"Married?"

"Yeah. Two or three kids. Three, I think. Yeah, that's right. Two girls and one boy. Girls are about thirteen and fourteen. The boy is in grade school. Wife's name is—ah—Nancy."

The men cut the rope and lowered the body to the ground. "I'll get something to wrap him in," Monty said. "A tarp." He looked at Sam. "Next thing is what are we going to do with him?"

"I don't know. Burn him, I guess."

"Jesus Christ, Sam!"

Sam met the man's eyes. "You want to start digging holes, then?"

Monty didn't.

"Ya'll got company on the other side of the fence," Joe called. "Two men and two young girls. Look like teenagers. I think it's the Abbott girls."

"Perhaps we have found, or they have found us, some more Christians," Monty said hopefully.

"Don't count on it." Sam dashed the hopes.

The voice of one of the girls confirmed it. She called from the other side of the tall fence. "What are you people gonna do with the old

fucker?"

"What is he to you?" Sam called.

"He was our daddy," the girl replied matter-of-factly. "We tried to give him some pussy. Our pussy. But he didn't want none of it. Hell with him."

"Dear God in Heaven," Monty whispered.

"Get away from this house," Sam warned them.

"Oh, fuck you, Balon," one of the men with the girls called. "You ain't gonna do nothing except run that goddamn Christian mouth of yours."

"I wish I had a grenade," Sam muttered.

"You'd kill the children, too," Monty told him. "My God, Sam. What do you have running in your veins, ice water?"

"Those 'kids,' as you call them, are dead already, Monty," Sam whispered. "Man—you have to accept that. Don't hesitate to shoot when the time comes. I mean it. Let me show you, Monty." He raised his voice. "Who cut off your father's testicles and penis?"

"You mean his cock and balls?" a girl asked.

"Yes."

"Me and mother. We tried to get him to fuck a boy up the ass but he wouldn't do it. So we cut them off. You should have heard him holler when we done it."

"Was the boy his son?"

"Yeah. We give him to some guys. They fucked him all night. I think he's dead, or something."

Sam cut his eyes to Monty. "Now you see what I'm talking about?"

Horror leaped into the man's eyes. "Their own father? Their own *brother!*"

"Their father is Satan," Sam told him. "I don't know what else has to happen to convince you of that fact. But you'd damn well better get your act together. Because if you don't, you're going to die and take a lot of us with you in the process."

Sam hooked one toe of his boot into a crack in the stone fence and heaved himself up. He burned half a clip into the group standing on the other side. He dropped back to face a horrified Monty Draper.

"You killed those people—those kids! You shot them in cold blood."

"If he hadn't of done it," Joe called from the second floor, "I damn sure was goin' to."

Sam was rapidly getting irritated at Monty. "Like I said, Monty. Get your shit together. And do it quickly."

TUESDAY NIGHT

"Things roamin' around on the other side of the fence," Joe radioed from the second floor. "They ain't them Beasts, but they ain't really

human neither, I don't think. I don't know what the hell they are, tell the truth. Look to me like they're all tore up."

"What are they doing?" Sam radioed back.

"Nothin'. Just standin' by the gate lookin' in. Man and a woman, I think. But it's hard to tell. They look familiar to me—kind of."

Sam cut his eyes to Father Le Moyne. The priest stood up. "I know," he said. "I felt their presence. Now I have to face them."

"What are you two talking about?" Barbara asked. The woman looked as if she was about to come unhinged.

"Daniel's brother and sister-in-law," John told her. "They've become part of the walking dead. They're here, looking for Daniel."

"Oh, *come on*, John!" his wife blurted. "Now this is getting totally out of hand. This is a nightmare. I'm asleep. None of this is real."

"Barbara—" John opened his mouth.

"No!" she screamed at the roomful of people. "I just, by God, will not take any more of this. I can't. I want out of here, John."

Before anyone could respond, a mocking male voice was heard, speaking through a bullhorn. "Oh, Barbara. Barbara, honey, come on out and play with us, Barbara. You remember me, don't you, Barbara?" He laughed, an ugly, evil ring to the savage bark of dark humor. The voice came from the east side of the grounds.

John Morton sighed and would not meet the eyes of those in the room.

"Cut the lights," Sam told Mille.

She plunged the room into darkness.

"Come on out, Barbara," the voice called. "I got something long and thick and hard for you. Come on, baby. Don't you remember how you used to love to lick on it?"

John rose from his chair and walked out of the room, a stiffness to his back. He left the room as if that act alone would prevent him from hearing the vulgarities coming from beyond the fence.

Barbara sat with tears running down her face. She sobbed quietly.

"Come on, honey!" the voice boomed through the night. "This is ol' Duke. Don't you remember how you used to love to get on top and sit on it? You said it felt good going in that way. Sure you remember. Come on out and play, Barbara. We'll be waiting."

Viv went to the sobbing woman. She pulled her from the chair and took her by the arm, leading her from the darkened room and into another room just off the hallway.

The bullhorn fell silent. Joe said, "I feel sorry for both them people. It ain't John's fault the way the Good Lord made him, and it ain't really her fault the way she is. Some folks just can't help the way they are." He walked toward the archway leading out of the room. "I got me a rifle upstairs. I think I'll go see if I can't get that Duke Edwards in

gunsights. If I do, I guarantee you, he's gonna be one dead son-of-a-bitch."

"Good luck," Monty said grimly, his comment surprising Sam.

Sam glanced at Father Le Moyne standing quietly in the heavy darkness. "You know what we have to do, Father. Are you ready?"

"Yes. Did you get the articles I asked for?"

"I got them," Sam replied. "They're in the hall. One for you and one for me."

"You're a brave young man, Sam."

Sam didn't respond to the compliment. He was as scared as the next person; but he knew fear was contagious, and he could not let his personal fear show. "Come on, Father. Let's do it. Noah? Even though a bullet won't stop them, enough lead will knock them down in case we run into—"

"Sam!" Joe yelled from upstairs. "Them folks that was by the gate—they're gone. I think I seen them walkin' on the grounds."

They all heard the back door open and close. The smell of the grave permeated the house.

THREE

"I sure would like to dip my wick in that Balon woman's snatch," Sheriff Pat Jenkins said to Vernon. "Sexy bitch." They stood a safe distance from the mansion, both of them looking at the hugeness of Fox Estate in the night. "Then I'd stem Monty's wife."

"Fine-looking cunts," Vernon agreed. "But Mille's the one I want."

"Miller Jenkins laughed. "Hell, Vern. She's been spreading that pussy around town since she was twelve/thirteen years old."

"It ain't wore out," the deputy replied. "Other than a woman's mouth, the pussy's the most durable part of her body. Besides, there's only two kinds: big ol' good ones and good ol' big ones."

The crowd of unshaven and unwashed men laughed at the old joke. The stench of them was foul. Dan Evans said, "And you ain't never had no bad, huh, Vern?"

"Nope. Just some that was better than others," Vernon said. He looked at Jenkins. "Why don't we rush them, Pat? Just rush them and take them out of that mansion?"

"The Master says no. The Princess says no. We have to obey. The Master is going to win this time, and he knows it. He wants to play with them for a time."

Vernon nodded his head in understanding. He looked around him. "Anybody here wanna come home with me and fuck my old lady?"

A huge fat man stepped up, an equally fat man with him. "Me and Jesse'll take a whack at her, Vern."

Vernon looked at the pair, an amused look in his eyes. "Yeah. One in front and one in back. That ought to be a sight to see. Wanna come see the show, Pat?"

"Bet she'll holler," the sheriff said with a smile. "Yeah, let's go."

The grounds of Nelson College lay dark and quiet in the purple of Satan's night. A light mist clung to the land, undisturbed by even a whisper of wind. Inside the dark structures, however, it was quite a different story. Low moanings could be heard from nearly every room; weeping and crying out for mercy came from the basements; the begging and pleading for God to put an end to this suffering and degradation whispered and echoed around the deserted halls and corridors of the buildings. The slap of flesh against flesh, the gruntings as male hardness hunched in and out of female softness played a rhythmic tune without melody or meter as dozens of rapes continued into the night.

In the basement of the administration building, a bloody and naked young man clung to life and love of God. Life was rapidly leaving him; but love of God had not. He refused to renounce his God.

Another young man, his clothing blood-splattered, stood over the naked young man, a stained knife in one hand. He turned to a group of men and women. His smile was macabre.

"Are you ready to take the pledge to forever serve the Master?" he asked the crowd of young people.

"Yes." The reply came as one voice. All eyes were on the hideously tortured young man tied to a table. To a person they had enjoyed the horrible cries from the torture. Yes. They were ready to take the pledge of submission.

Professor Edie Cash began intoning the chant that would forever seal the fate of all who repeated the damning words.

And all present repeated the chant of the damned.

Screaming filled the basement as the knife-wielding young man began cutting into living flesh. He removed the still beating heart and held it in his hands, blood leaking from life's muscle, dripping onto the floor.

"Now you are and always will be one with us," Edie told the group. "For you, there will be no turning back. Now, go! Seek out and find all nonbelievers in the word of the Dark One. Bring them to us. *Go!*"

The room quickly emptied.

Edie looked at what was left of the young man on the bloody table. "Stupid fool," she said. "He could have had eternal life with us." She lifted her eyes to the young man standing with the knife and heart in his hands. "Have him taken to the Beasts."

"Yes, mistress."

Sam and Father Le Moyne ran from the room and jerked up the sharpened stakes leaning against the wall in the hall. Sam paused for a moment at the door.

"Lock all the doors to this room and don't let anybody you don't know inside. No matter what they might say. And be sure it's who you think it is. Father Le Moyne, Noah—let's do it."

The smell of the undead was strong in the mansion. The smell was of rotting flesh and blood. The lights flickered off and on, finally settling into a dimness, shadowing the corners and pockets of the hall.

"Daniel." The whisper drifted through the dim corridors of the lower level of the huge house. "Come, Daniel. We want you, brother. Come to us and we'll go home. Come meet us, now, brother. It's time."

A hissing sound filled the corridor. The hissing was followed by the foulest of smells.

Father Le Moyne began murmuring prayers. He held vials of holy water, one vial in each hand. He whispered to Sam, "The holy water will cause them great agony. But you must strike immediately after the liquid touches their flesh. Give me a stake."

"You handle the holy water, Father," Sam returned the whisper. "I'll handle the stakes. I'm younger and stronger. Are you sure you can go through with this, Father?"

"They are no longer of this world, Sam. That is not my brother nor my brother's wife. They are of the undead, the walking dead. They must be destroyed."

"Look out!" Noah yelled. "To our right."

Creatures from the depths of horror's living reality came lunging at the three men, momentarily freezing them in the grips of stark terror and revulsion.

Noah was the first to react. His shotgun roared, the double ought slugs ripping into already mangled flesh, knocking the man and woman sprawling backward. The sight was more than hideous. Father Le Moyne's brother had only part of his face; one eye dangled from the socket. His chest was ripped open, exposing the rib cage. His wife was torn and mangled from her face to her knees; she had been thrown through the windshield. Bloody tissue and whiteness of bone was evident.

The priest sprang into action. He hurled the holy water onto the flesh of the undead.

The man and woman shrieked in agony as the blessed water burned and seared the unholy flesh. Their gaping mouths spewed forth great belches of stinking breath as they thrashed on the polished floor. A thick yellow fluid began leaking from the smoking holes in their flesh.

Sam jumped forward, a stake in each hand. He drove the first stake into the center of the man's chest, whirled around, and drove the

second stake through the heart of the woman.

"Noah," Sam shouted. "Work the stake deeper into his chest."

The writer handed Father Le Moyne his shotgun and jumped into the middle of the stinking gore, grabbing the stake and working it deeper into the man's heart.

The screaming of the undead echoed through the great house, ricocheting off the marble statues, the fine paintings, the old wood, and causing the chandeliers to vibrate, trembling as if in terror.

Dirty yellow smoke began rising from the man and woman. They jerked and screamed as their souls left their bodies. Father Le Moyne prayed to God Almighty to forgive the dead, for what they had become was not of their choosing.

The smoke drifted away; the moaning ceased; the jerking stopped; the man and woman were no more a part of the living dead. Nothing was left of them except a few scraps of stinking rags and the dust of a few bones.

"Noah," Sam said. "Find a garbage bag. I'll get a shovel from the utility shed." He looked at the priest. "You want to say anything over them when I bury what is left of them, Father?"

Le Moyne hesitated for a moment. "No," he said. "I've said all that needs to be said. There is more I could say, but I don't believe it's necessary."

"Barbara." The electronically pushed voice once more found its way into the mansion. "Come on, baby. Come suck ol' Duke's cock again. Then you can bend over and I can stick it to you. I bet you'd like—"

Joe's rifle barked, flame leaping from the muzzle of the .270. A bubbling, choking scream cut a painful scar into the ink of night, followed by a thump and a metallic sound scraping on concrete.

Joe's voice drifted downstairs. "Shot that bastard right in the bullhorn. Drove that sucker slap into his mouth and down his throat. Bet that'll shut him up."

Somewhere in the huge mansion, Barbara began alternately laughing and screaming hysterically.

WEDNESDAY

"What has been done to bring Sam Balon to me?" Xaviere asked the coven leaders.

No one replied. None present would meet the young woman's piercing eyes.

"I see," she spoke softly. "Sam and the others have ignored my deadline. I cannot, for some reason, reach my Master Father, and that disturbs me. For I am unsure as to the proper direction to take. I do not know what has happened. He was here only hours ago. Now he is gone."

"Princess!" Jimmy Perkins shuffled into the room. "The Tablet is gone!"

They all knew what that meant. Satan was gone.

But why did he leave?

"You cheating, rotten, no good son of a cosmic *whore!*" The Dark One hurled the message across the sky in plumes of yellow smoke.

In the firmament, the Almighty yawned.

"Damn You! How *dare* You interfere with my earthly affairs? That was not the deal we made. You were to keep Your meddling nose *out* of my affairs."

"I make no deals with the likes of you, wallower in filth. Besides, how have I interfered? The followers of My Word are still surrounded by your rabble. The barrier you erected around the community is still in place and functioning. I have not prevented the torture and rapes and deaths. How can you say I have interfered?"

"*You son-of-a-bitch!*" Satan roared. "I cannot reenter the community. I have been blocked. You have blocked me from entering."

"No, fallen one. I have done nothing of the sort. You are mistaken."

Satan was silent for a time. When he again communicated with the one whom he once served, he had calmed himself. "Which is precisely the reason I hid the Tablet before leaving that area. I *knew* somehow You would find a way to jam Your fucking nose into my business."

The Almighty directed His never closing and all-seeing eyes downward. "What are you implying, foul one?"

"That You are a liar!"

"I shall take no umbrage at that. No, Prince of Darkness. It was not I who interfered on Earth. And it was not my warrior, for he is seated beside me." The Ruler of Light looked at his old friend and companion. The warrior was sitting calmly, a smile on his lips. A rather smug smile, the Almighty thought.

Satan began shrieking once more and the Almighty blocked out the howlings from the northernmost regions on Earth and spoke to the warrior. "Where is the elder Balon?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea."

"You tell lies to Me? Here?"

"I have not told a lie in so many centuries I've forgotten how it would feel," the warrior replied. "Well— years, anyway. But I am being truthful with You. I do not know where the Elder Balon is."

"But he is gone from the firmament?"

Without hesitation the warrior said, "Yes. Would You like for me to search for him on Earth?"

"No, I most certainly would not\ Perhaps Valhalla was not such a bad idea after all. Warriors can be such a nuisance. They're all so

scheming. Very well. So the father has once more gone to help his son?"

"No—I don't believe that is entirely the case," the warrior replied. "I do think that perhaps he has evened the odds a bit. I think that is all he will do. Leaving the rest up to the small band of believers. I think he will stay on, viewing the battleground."

"And you would like to leave here to help Balon— ah—reconnoiter the situation?"

"That thought has occurred to me," the warrior replied blandly.

"Oh, I just imagine it has." The reply from the Almighty was dryly given.

Both were conscious of Satan's furious howlings from Earth. Satan was shrieking for the Almighty to answer him. How dare He block him out?

"Oh, shut up!" the Almighty roared from the heavens.

Minor earthquakes were felt along several fault lines on earth. Hurricanes formed and then died. Volcanoes puffed smoke and ash.

Then all was calm.

"See what happens when You lose Your temper?" Michael said. "You really should try to watch things like that."

The Almighty heaved a mighty sigh. He should be used to the warrior's needling by now. No one else would dare speak to Him in such a manner. "Find out how Balon keeps slipping out."

"The same way he always slips out. He's an adventurous sort. Restless."

"Why would he be restless *here*?"

"Because he is a warrior. Relax. I don't believe the elder Balon is going to interfere any further."

"Why is it your words somehow fail to comfort Me?"

The warrior stroked his beard. He wished he was down on Earth, with Balon, kicking ass. "I haven't the foggiest," he said.

"Sam?" Nydia asked. "Why are you so uptight this morning?"

Sam had awakened in silence, and he had not spoken more than ten words in an hour. He glanced at his wife. "My father is near. I can feel his presence. He is very near."

"He's here to help us?"

"No. I don't think so. I don't get that feeling at all this time."

"Who's here to help us?" Joe asked, turning from his post at a front window.

"My father," Sam said.

"Your *father*? But—ain't he *dead*?"

Noah and Father Le Moyne sat quietly. Jeanne La-Meade sat beside the priest. The rest of the small group were at their posts, maintaining

a watch from the upper level of the mansion.

"He came back before," Nydia said. "He met us at the Montreal airport several years ago."

"Lordy!" Joe said.

Flight 127 came in and emptied its load of passengers. Sam knew no one on the flight. He and Nydia sat in the now deserted arrival area, looking at each other, unanswered questions in their eyes.

"Son?" the disembodied-sounding voice came from behind the young couple. Sam was conscious of a burning sensation in the center of his chest.

They turned, looking around. No one was in sight. Nydia dug nervous fingers into Sam's forearm. "Son? Was that what the voice said?"

"Easy now," Sam attempted to calm her. His own nerves were rattled.

"Sam?" she said. "Look on the table in front of us."

A manila envelope lay on the table. It had not been there when they arrived.

They both looked at the deserted area around them. They looked at the envelope.

Sam touched the packet. It was cold. He picked it up and carefully opened it. A picture and several sheets of paper. Sam looked at the eight-by-ten of his father for a long moment, then handed it to Nydia. "My dad," he said.

"I can see where you got your good looks. Your dad was a rugged, handsome man. Sam? Where did the envelope come from?"

There was a slight grimace of pain on Sam's face.

"Sam!"

"I don't know the answer, Nydia. But when that voice spoke, my chest started burning. It's better now, but man, did it hurt for a few seconds."

Sam looked around them. No one in sight. Sam unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his T-shirt. He heard Nydia gasp.

"Look at your T-shirt, Sam. The center of your chest."

The fabric was burned brown, in the shape of a cross. The cross that Sam wore. His father's cross.

Nydia pulled up the T-shirt. The cross had burned his skin, leaving a scar in the shape of a cross. The scar was red, but no longer painful, even though it was burned deep.

Sam opened the pages from the envelope and almost became physically ill. The handwriting was unmistakably his father's scrawl. Sam had seen it many times on old sermons.

"You're white as a ghost, Sam."

"I—think that's what just spoke to me. My father wrote this."
The young man wiped suddenly blurry eyes and began slowly reading, Nydia reading silently beside him.

Son—writing is difficult for me, in my condition. Want to keep this as brief as possible, but yet, there are so many things I must say to you and the girl.

"How—" Nydia said, then shook her head, not understanding or believing any of this—yet.

I have watched you, son—whenever possible— grow through the years. Tried to guide you, help you, as best I could, Nydia, too. The girl beside you, not the Nydia I—knew. Like that time you got drunk in your mother's car and passed out at the wheel. A close one, boy.

"I'm the only person in this world who knew about that," Sam said.

"In this world, yes," Nydia said. She was beginning to believe.

Give the cross you wear around your neck to the girl. Do it, son. Time is of the essence.

Nydia was softly crying as Sam put the cross around her neck.

No one will be able to remove that cross from her. No one. I cannot guarantee she will not be hurt, but—well, you must have faith.

Now then, a cruel blow for each of you, for I know your thoughts: Nydia is your half-sister.

"Oh, my God!" Sam said.

When I knew her mother, Roma was not her name. Her name was Nydia. She is of and for the Devil. She is a witch. After the hooved one attempted to take over the town of Whitfield— and failed, then— during which Wade, Anita, Chester, Tony, Jane Ann, Miles, Doris, and myself killed hundreds of coven members, I made a bargain with our God to save your mother and what few Christians remained. I won, in a sense. But so did the woman you know as Roma. I killed, or at least sent back to Hell, Black Wilder, the Devil's representative. Your half-brother, son, Black, is named for Wilder. And like that spawn of Hell, he is a warlock.

When you leave this terminal, the both of you must go to a Catholic church and get as much holy water as you can. You will need it.

Sam glanced at Nydia. Half-sister?
She met his eyes, read his thoughts. "I don't care."
They returned to the letter.

It would be wrong, son, to say the Devil is back, for that one never leaves the Earth; so I'll simply say he has returned to Whitfield. There will soon be a great tragedy in Whitfield, and I must be there to help your mother, for her ordeal involves both of us—and the girl. There will be no survivors from Whitfield. None.

"Mother—" Sam whispered. And as if the elder Balon had anticipated the question, the letter continued:

She has made her choice. Tony has gone over to the other side. He has done so willingly; indeed, a long time ago. I could not stop him, for his faith is weak, as is his flesh. And that is something you will have to deal with as well.

You have a mission, son, and I do not envy you your task, for it could destroy you—not necessarily physically, and I can say no more about that. But you are as surely set to this mission as I was, years ago. You will be tempted, and you will fall to some of those temptations, for you are a mortal, blessed in a manner of speaking, but still a mortal.

A coven is being established at Falcon House. It is a house of evil, and you must return there. Your job is there. You will not be able to contact anyone in Whitfield. Whitfield is dead; past saving. But your mother will speak to you—in some manner—before she slips through the painful darkness to the other side, and to peace and blue and light.

We will meet someday, son. I am certain of that and can tell you no more about my surety.

The feelings you and the girl share is something that you both must cope with. I cannot help you and I will not lecture you. But I will say this: The union that produced Nydia was not a holy union. If anything, it was blessed by the Dark One.

"Riddles," Sam said. "The letter is filled with riddles, and I don't know what they mean."

I love you deeply, Sam, and wish I could be of more help to you in your task. But I have said too much already.

Now I must go. Place the picture of me in the envelope, for that is all of me I can give you that will remain tangible. Put the letter on the

table and do not touch it again.

Love, Father

Sam placed the picture in the envelope, the letter on the table. Together, still in mild shock, not knowing what to believe, the young man and woman watched the pages dissolve into nothing. Then they were alone.

Nydia put her head on Sam's shoulder and wept.

"Lordy!" Joe said.

Sam felt his chest begin burning. He put down his AK-47 and unbuttoned his shirt. All could see the brown burn on the white of Sam's T-shirt.

Nydia helped him out of his shirt and Sam pulled his T-shirt off. The cross dangling from a chain around his neck was glowing a golden fire.

Noah, Father Le Moyne, and Jeanne crossed themselves. Joe stood in numb shock.

"The same way the cross you gave me in Montreal did," Nydia said.

"Yeah," Sam said, putting his shirt back on. "He's here, very close, I believe."

"Don't that burn you?" Joe asked, recovering from his shock.

"For a few seconds," Sam told him. "It will just deepen the scar already there."

"Why do you believe your father is not here to help you?" Noah asked.

"It's just a feeling I have. I can't explain it any further than that."

"Nydia is wearing the cross that received the blessing at the airport," Father Le Moyne mused aloud. "And now the cross you wear has been blessed from beyond the veil. I knew none of this. I believe of all of us, Sam, you have the power to destroy a demon."

"My father is not a saint," Sam told the priest. "He is a resident of Heaven, but that doesn't make him a—doesn't give him the power to make me something I am not."

The priest smiled. "I disagree with that, Sam. Very strongly. Did you not tell me you faced down one of the Devil's creatures up in Canada? That you fought a warlock and defeated him? Yes, you did. And yes, Sam, I believe you have been blessed."

A bullet slammed through a window, the lead whining off a wall, finally coming to rest after bouncing around on the carpet. Everybody in the room had hit the floor.

"I may be blessed, Father," Sam said dryly. "But if you don't mind, I'd rather not have to prove it by getting myself shot."

"Lordy!" Joe said.

FOUR

The day dragged on slowly, with the low clouds and occasional mist seeming to wrap a dirty shroud around the landscape. That one shot was, so far, the only hostile move taken by the Devil worshippers.

The people behind the stone walls of the great mansion could occasionally hear the faint sounds of moaning, but could not tell where they were originating or what was happening to cause them.

But all could guess.

And if the elder Balon was near, he did not make his presence known. At least in any manner the humans could fathom.

The day had turned off cool, with the temperature dropping into the upper thirties by early afternoon. The wind had picked up, blowing in from the northwest, as if pushed by a mighty helping hand. The small band of Christians could do nothing but wait; and wonder what was next in store for them.

By mid-afternoon, they knew.

"Hello, the house!" Pat Jenkins's voice roared into the old mansion, pushed through a bullhorn.

Joe keyed his handy-talkie. "He ain't alone," he radioed from the upstairs. "There's a bunch with him, and they're lookin' ugly."

"Armed?" Sam radioed.

"Look like a bunch of dirty pirates about to jump on board ship."

"Hello, the house!" Jenkins again called.

Using a bullhorn taken from the trunk of Monty's Logandale police car, Sam said, "What do you want, Jenkins?"

"The Princess wants to talk to you, Balon."

"Tell her to use the telephone."

"No way, Balon. Face to face."

"Forget it, Jenkins."

"You'd better listen to me, Balon. You'll be sorry if you don't see her, kid. All bets are off. We can handle this situation any goddamn way we see fit. And that's the way it is. You understand what I'm saying?"

"What's he mean, Sam?" Nydia asked.

"I don't know. Unless someone of a higher power has interfered, causing Satan to pull out; something like that."

"Your Dad?"

"I—don't think he has that much power." Sam suddenly smiled. "I think the old warrior is pulling a fast one and helping Dad, even though God has probably forbidden him—both of them—to do so."

"Why would He do that?" Jeanne asked. "I mean, forbid us help? All it would take is just one little-bitty miracle on His part and we'd be out and safe."

"I don't think God does miracles much anymore," Sam told her and

the group. "I think He gives humans the wherewithal and then pretty much leaves it up to them after that."

"That is correct," the voice spoke in Sam's head.

"Dad?" Sam asked quietly.

The room full of people fell silent.

"Hello, the goddamn house!" Jenkins called.

He was ignored.

"Yes, son."

"Dad, what is happening?"

"Satan is gone, He will not return to that coven. Unless you fail and they are victorious. You need not worry about the Tablet. But you will be under siege for several days. Look to yourself to even the odds. You are trained to do that. The siege of Satan's followers must conclude by midnight, Saturday. And you must be especially careful between six P.M. and midnight on Friday."

"Xaviere?"

"Exactly. I will be able to assist very little, if at all. I will more than likely be punished—chastised is a better word—when I return."

"For helping us?"

"Yes."

"Is it difficult to slip out—of there, I mean?"

The voice seemed to chuckle. "No. But the majority don't wish to leave. I can't explain any further, son. You will see, in time."

"Dad, you will forgive me if I choose not to be in any great hurry?"

Laughter in Sam's head. "The old warrior likes you, son—likes you a lot."

"Michael? What is he, Dad? And how can he get away with the things he does?"

"If you had been born when I was active in the pulpit and asked that question of me, you and I would have had quite a session in the woodshed," the voice said with a chuckle. "Michael, son? Michael is one who is like unto God. He is a Levite; a chief man of Issachar; father of Omri; father of Zebadiah; son of Jehoshaphat. Michael is the archangel; God's warrior. Michael is many things to us all; he sits by the right hand of God. And he loves a good fight and loves warriors. Like you, my son."

And Sam knew then what his father expected him to do. "Dad—I can't fight an entire town."

"I did," the father threw down the challenge with that short statement.

Sam felt the presence of his dad leave him, leave the house. The more astute of the others in the room also picked up on the departure.

"He is gone," Noah said.

"Yes," Sam said. He then informed the gathering of the gist of his

conversation with his father. Joe came in the room just in time to catch the last part.

"The whole damned town!" he blurted. "There ain't no way possible, Sam. Good God, boy—think about the odds, will you?"

"Dad seemed to think there is," Sam countered. "And he was adamant on that."

"Sam," Monty protested. "We're outnumbered three or four hundred to *one*!"

"I know," the young man said. "But so was Dad, back in Nebraska, in the late '50s."

Joe looked mournful. "Yeah. But he got *killed*."

Sam glanced at him. "Yes. To save the others," he reminded them all.

"You gonna answer me or not, you son-of-a-bitch!" Jenkins yelled through the bullhorn. "I'm damn tired of fucking around with you, Balon."

Sam walked to a window facing the front grounds, opened it, and burned a full clip of ammunition at the gate and the crowd gathered there. Sam watched in grim satisfaction as his burst of fire knocked half a dozen sprawling on the gravel and the concrete. Three of them lay still, dying in bloods of blood. The others twitched and moaned and screamed in pain.

"There's my reply, Jenkins!" Sam yelled.

"We'll get you, Balon!" Jenkins promised. "We'll get you all. You can't get out, none of you."

Then the truth hit Sam. That's right—we can't get out. But for some reason I have yet to understand, you people are very reluctant to come onto these grounds.

He closed the window and turned to Father Le Moyne. He said as much to the priest, adding, "Can you tell me the story behind this house; these grounds? Is there something special about it?"

"Sam, there is something that has been nagging at me ever since the day I met you and your wife. But I can't pull it to the surface. For some reason, I think someone is buried on these grounds, under the house, perhaps. It will come to me, in time."

"I know something about the house," Noah said. "Both this house and the Giddon house were begun within hours of each other, and finished on the same day. So the stories go. For approximately forty years, this mansion was owned by a group of religious people, of all faiths. That was from—oh, 1890 to probably 1931 or '32. Then the mansion was empty for about twenty-five years. Along about 1945, just after the war, it came back on the market. It's been owned by several families since that time."

"A group of religious people," Sam said. "What did they do here?"

"No one seems to know," Noah told him. "And I have done extensive research on the matter. But this one interesting fact kept cropping up: Religious leaders from all around the world have met here on more than one occasion. Very secretly. Between 1890 and 1930. People of all faiths; and I mean *all* faiths. But I do not have the vaguest idea what—if anything—was accomplished by or during those meetings."

"I wonder why they stopped meeting here?" Father Le Moyne asked. "And now that you mention it, I do recall something about that. And also about the name Balon. It will come to me, I'm sure."

"Well," Noah said. "I have shared all the information I know on the subject. I will admit, it fascinated me for a time, but the well ran dry, and one can only butt one's head against a stone wall for so long."

"Desiree?" Sam looked at the beautiful young woman. "Does this place have an attic?"

"I'm sure it does," she replied. "But everything has—happened so fast I haven't even thought of looking for it."

"Monty, you and the others keep your eyes open," Sam said. He looked at Noah. "Want to explore the house?"

"Delighted, Sam."

When questioned, Desiree admitted she had no idea where any keys might be located. She had keys to the entrance doors on the ground floor and to the garage. That was it.

"See if you can find me an axe," Sam said to Richard Hasseling. "If the doors are locked, and I'm betting they will be, we'll break them in. I'll get us some flashlights and we'll be ready to go."

It took four heavy swings with the axe to break down the final door leading to the attic. When the thick oak door was smashed, hanging by its hinges, the two men were met by yawning darkness, the open mouth of the cavernous room greeting them like some prehistoric monster lying in wait for prey.

For the first time Noah showed some hesitation. "I don't like this, Sam."

"Neither do I," Sam admitted. "But I think there are answers somewhere in this room. And I want to know why those Devil worshippers outside so far refuse to set foot on the grounds of Fox Estate."

Sam fumbled around in the entrance of the room until he found the light switch and clicked it on. Naturally, nothing happened. The room remained immersed in darkness, ominously silent.

"Nydia," he called. "See if you can find some light bulbs, honey."

The men clicked on flashlights, playing the beams of light into the room, the narrow lines of light touching the dusty, cobwebbed, sheet-draped contents of the attic.

"A veritable paradise for collectors of junk," Noah observed. He

flicked a beam of light upward. "There's the drop cord for the bulb."

"Sure is spooky in there," Nydia said from behind the men.

Neither had heard her footsteps and Noah jumped about a foot off the floor.

"My dear," he said. "You do have a quiet approach. I think I just aged about a decade."

Sam changed the bulb, flipped on the switch, and the attic was filled with light. Dark pockets where the light did not touch crawled around the corners and edges of the big room.

"You search to your right, Noah. I'll take the left side," Sam said.

"I'll explore the center," Nydia said. "What are we looking for?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted. "But I think we'll know it when we see it."

Noah opened a creaking trunk lid and hauled out a pair of women's old-time bloomers. "My word!" he said. "Obviously the meetings conducted here were not all confined to matters of religion."

"Maybe they belonged to a nun," Nydia said.

"Possible," Noah said. "But not likely. These— undergarments were worn about eighty or ninety years ago. Not many women took part in any serious business of any type back then."

"Bring back the good old days," Sam said with a grin, knowing he would get a rise out of Nydia.

"Keep talking, turkey," Nydia responded. She opened a trunk and removed a leather-covered book. She worked at the rusted clasp and finally opened the book. The pages were all handwritten in a beautiful flowing style.

All in Latin.

"Damn!" she said. "I had to take Latin in high school, but this is too much for me."

"Let me see it," Noah said, walking to her. "I read Latin." He studied it for a few silent moments. "Well, now. This is most interesting. Might be what we are seeking. Listen to this, you two."

He carefully turned a page and said, "This is a copy—not the original, of course, this is dated 1901 — of the *Compendium Maleficarum*. In short, a breakdown on how to become a witch or warlock. It was first written in Italy, in the early 1600s."

Noah quickly and silently scanned more of the old pages, speed-reading.

"All right," he said. "This part concerns the Black Mass, the Sabbat. This next text is in French. It concerns the coldness of the Devil's penis. Excuse me, Nydia." He closed the old book. "Fascinating reading, but I don't believe it's what we're looking for. But I think we're on the right track. So let's continue our search."

A knocking reached the ears of the searchers. The trio froze in

place. The tapping seemed to be coming from a dark corner of the dusty attic. Coming from a large crate.

A crate large enough to contain a body, Sam thought.

"I picked up on that," Nydia said. "Thanks a lot, lover-boy."

"Picked up on what?" Noah asked.

"Forget it, Noah," Sam told him. He looked around the attic. His eyes found a rusty, dust-covered old crowbar. Sam picked it up, shook off the dirt, and walked to the large crate. The thumping became louder.

"Sam!" Nydia said.

"It has to be," he told her. "Whatever is in that crate is coming out. Maybe with or without our help."

Noah pulled his .357 from leather and stepped up to the crate, standing beside Sam.

Three thick metal strips, secured by heavy old locks held the lid in place. Sam broke the first lock. The knocking and tapping ceased. Sam looked at Noah. The man's face was sweaty but his grip on the big pistol was firm and steady. Sam pried loose the second lock, then the final lock was broken, freeing not only the lid, but whatever was in the crate.

Sam wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans and gripped the lid in his big hands. He flung it open.

Noah gasped.

Nydia turned loose the scream that had gathered in her throat.

Something dark and bloody flew at the trio.

The news had spread quickly throughout the coven: The Master was gone. The Dark One was no longer in the area. But his daughter, the Princess, was here, so everything had to be all right.

But the seeds of doubt had been sewn, and fertile minds were nurturing the seeds.

For the tenth time that day, Princess Xaviere tried to make communication with her Master Father. For the tenth time she failed.

She sat in her quarters in the Giddon House, in the flickering candlelight, and stared in the direction of the mansion on the other side of the stone wall. She thought she had heard a woman scream just a moment before, but she was not sure. So much screaming from the weak Christians left in the town. She did not know what to do. She could not understand why her Master Father had deserted her when victory seemed so near.

"Very well," she muttered. "Obviously he is testing me. So be it." She made up her mind.

She rang for the coven leaders to come to her.

"Make plans to storm the house," she told them. "It seems the only

way left us. But Sam Balon must be taken alive. I must have his seed. See to it."

And far away, in his nether region at the far north, Satan screamed his outrage.

"No! You dumb bitch. That is exactly what He wants. You're playing right into Balon's hands. You stupid fucking cunt. You useless daughter of a whore!"

Satan pointed his dark evil face to the heavens and screamed his fury at the Almighty, wrongly blaming Him for what was occurring on Earth.

But the Almighty had grown weary of Satan's tirades, and had blocked the Dark One from His ears.

But the warrior heard. And the mighty warrior could not conceal his victorious smile.

"Kick ass time," the warrior muttered.

An old ragged piece of red silk, attached to the inside of the lid, flapped in the sudden rush of air following the opening of the crate's lid.

But the crate itself was empty.

When their hearts had settled down into a slower pulsing, and jangled nerves ceased ringing, Sam was the first to speak.

"What the hell? I know the knocking was coming from this empty crate."

Noah shone the beam from his flashlight into the dark reaches of the crate. "Not entirely empty," he said. "Put your light in here, Sam."

The twin beams of light played off the interior of the crate, piercing the gloom, settling on the bottom of the huge rectangular box.

"It's a book of some sort," Nydia said.

Noah rose to his tiptoes and reached into the crate, almost falling in. Sam grabbed the smaller man by the seat of his pants and hauled him back.

"It's a journal of some kind," Noah said, carefully opening the old manuscript, bound in leather and worn leather strips. "When was it written?" he muttered. "Ah! Here it is—1666. Three sixes," he said. "How apropos." He visibly paled when he saw the name of the author on the inside of the leather covering.

"What's wrong, Noah?" Nydia asked, looking at the man's sudden loss of composure.

"Samuel Balon," the man said softly. "Samuel Balon wrote this. He started the journal in France, in 1659." He carefully turned the old pages. They were in remarkably good condition for a journal written more than three hundred years before. "This entry was written in a place called Ville Marie."

"Montreal," Nydia said. "Ville Marie was the original name of the city."

"Listen to this," Noah said. "I think this might have some bearing on our predicament. *Le cog s'oyt par fois es sabbats sonnat le retraicte aux Sorciers.*"

"Translate it, please," Sam said.

Father Le Moyne's voice startled them all. The priest stood in black, framed in light in the shattered doorway to the attic. He said, "the cock crows; the Sabbat ends; the Sorcerers scatter and flee away."

"But what message does it contain for us?" Noah threw the question to anyone who might have an answer.

"I think," Sam said, "that it goes along with what my father said. It's telling us to hold out until Sunday. If we can make it until then, we're safe."

"But Sam," Nydia said. "I—what about the town? Even if we do make it—when we make it," she amended that. "All the dead people; the destruction, everything. What do we do? How do we explain it? Are we going to have to run again? Are we always going to be looking over our shoulder, living in fear?"

The young man was silent for a moment, very conscious of Father Le Moyne's eyes upon him. It was as if the priest could see something about him; knew something about him that Sam did not know.

"I can't answer that, Nydia. Maybe—maybe I— we—have been—picked for this job; maybe this is what we were put here to do. Wherever there is a coven, perhaps it's our job to seek it out, destroy it. I don't know. I hope with all my heart that is not the case, but if it is, then we have to obey. I think when this is over, here in Logandale, then we will know for sure. One way or the other."

Her dark eyes searched his strong face. "All right, Sam. If that is the case, where you go, I go."

Father Le Moyne smiled. It was working out well. Michael was going to see his dream become reality. The mighty warrior would have a man on Earth to do His work.

But the heavens would roar when the Almighty discovered what His warrior had done. But, Le Moyne thought, the firmament has shook from the rage of God before—and probably would again.

Nydia tapped the journal Noah held. "But who, or what, was this Samuel Balon?"

Father Le Moyne decided he could no longer hide the truth from the group. He could continue to hide his true identity for a while longer, but even that, in time, would have to be revealed.

"He was a priest," Le Moyne said. He sighed. "Close the crate and come downstairs. I'll tell you what I know about Father Balon." Or what I am allowed to tell you, that is, he thought.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Sam muttered.

FIVE

"Samuel was not the priest's name. His name was Yves. The Church gave him the name of Father Sam. From—what I have been able to gather through the years, Father Sam was a huge bear of a man, and rather a maverick as far as the Church was concerned. One of the reasons he was sent to the New World, I should imagine. I know all this because—well, let's just say I did a paper on the man in college.

"You see, Father Sam—and that is a misnomer—for the man left the Church, married, and when his wife—" He hesitated, seemed to inwardly struggle for a few seconds, then continued, but Sam and Noah both saw the grimace on his face when he said the word, ... *"died"*; well, he attempted to once more assume the title of priest. Of course, it was refused him." Father Le Moyne smiled strangely. "But Father Sam, being the type man he—was, did not let that deter him. He came to this part of the New World, established a Church, and went about his business as if nothing had happened. This house is supposedly built over his grave, so the story goes. No one has yet been able to verify that.

"As far as why those religious leaders met here," the priest said, doing his best to wear a sheepish look, "had it not been for Father Sam's leaving the Church and marrying, the man might well have been canonized. It is—said that Father Sam met the Devil face on and beat him. Right here on this very spot where we are sitting. I, ah, don't know all the particulars, but that's it in a nutshell."

The priest is lying, Sam thought. But not lying for any personal reasons. He's lying for a very—pure reason, the phrase came to him.

"You said he married, Daniel," Noah said. "Do you know the name of the woman he married?"

The priest's smile was strangely rueful. "Oh, yes," he said softly. "Very well. Michelle Dubois. The union produced several children. One priest came out of that union. Father Sam killed one of the children with his bare hands; a daughter. The other daughter, named after her mother, Michelle, married a man by the name of Duhon. That union produced a cabin-full of children. Several of the boys became trappers. They went west, out around what is now Nebraska; in that area. The other boys of that union became priests. Those that didn't go into the priesthood married— more children. More priests out of those unions.

"The last record of priests from any marriage of those related to Father Balon was in the late 1700s, in Nebraska. For some reason, the Balons, the Duhons— they left the Catholic faith behind them and

joined the Protestant religion. I don't know why."

Sam leaned back in his chair. He was aware of Father Le Moyne's eyes on him. The stories he had heard as a child; rumors and tall tales about the goings-on around Whitfield came to Sam's mind. He began tying them all up into neat little packages.

"You appear to be deep in thought, Sam," Noah said, looking at the expression on Sam's face.

"Yes," he said. Sam then related all the stories he had heard as a child. About Tyson's Lake, Father Dubois, the trapper Duhon, Sam's own father's first wife, Michelle the witch.*

"It keeps coming back to you, Sam," Monty said.

"Unfortunately," Sam muttered, very much aware of Father Le Moyne's intense gaze.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT

"Seventy-eight hours to go," Joe said. "Might as well be seventy-eight years."

Mille put her hand on Joe's arm. "We're going to make it out of this, Joe," she said, gently squeezing his forearm. "And I want you to know I think you are a fine, good man for staying here, helping in this fight."

"I ain't no better than none of the others, Mille. I really don't understand what is happening around here. All this Devil stuff and exorcisms and the walking dead." He shook his head. "Too much for an ol' country boy like me."

"How old are you, Joe?"

"Too damned old for a young chicken like you," he replied, sensing the direction the conversation was taking.

She smiled up at him and something soft touched his heart. "How about you letting me be the judge of that?" she responded, her words gentle.

"Mille—"

"Shut up, Joe. Just put your arms around me and hold me for a minute or two, all right?"

"Be glad to oblige," Joe said, his voice husky.

Father Le Moyne stood in the darkness of the foyer and smiled. He slipped quietly back into the shadows and left the two alone. He approved of Mille and Joe, despite the vast differences in age.

Barbara came to John and put her arms around her husband. "If we get out of this mess, John, I'll walk out of your life. You can tell people I died—anything. I won't disgrace you with a divorce. I'll change my name and move away. You can get another church and—"

"No," her husband said, a new firmness to his voice. "Barbara, I never really tried to understand your—problem. Or mine, for that

matter. We'll go to doctors, counselors, anything or anybody you like. But we will work it out, I promise you."

"But the things Duke said."

"Forget about Duke, Barbara. Put all that behind you. It's over."

She put her head on his shoulder and wept.

Monty and Viv sat upstairs, looking out over the darkened sector assigned to them. Sam had referred to it as their perimeter. They were content to be together, touching, their love vibrating between them, constantly reaffirming with silent love messages.

Jeanne and Ginny sat in a darkened bedroom, looking after Little Sam. Both the young women had fallen in love with the little boy. He was such a good child; never fussy or whiny. He was a happy child. Even if he did sometimes get a funny look in his eyes.

"I think Byron Price kind of likes you," Jeanne said.

Ginny laughed softly. "Yeah. I never flirted with a preacher before."

"I think he's cute, in a kind of fumbling way. You know what I mean?"

"Yes. Me, too. And it must have been awful for him, his wife taking off that way."

"I'll stay with Little Sam. Why don't you go sit with Mr. Price. I know you want to."

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all."

"Thanks, Jeanne. I owe you one."

Little Sam sat looking at the draped window, as if he could see through the drapes to the other side. There was a very strange look in his eyes.

Richard Hasseling was very conscious of Desiree's presence. Uncomfortably so. He had never seen any woman quite so beautiful as Desiree. And his feelings for her were becoming—well, unnerving. He had to keep constantly reminding himself he was a Baptist minister.

And a virgin.

When Desiree sat down next to him and put a soft hand on his thigh, Richard thought he was going to die. For sure, he couldn't risk getting up. He would stick out in front.

Father Le Moyne found Noah at his post at the rear of the house. "Noah? Maintain your sentry duties and I'll talk. I want to tell you something."

"Very well, Daniel."

"I will not come out of this alive, Noah. No! Don't say anything. It is—well, I am prepared for it. I want you to know I have valued your friendship. And I am sorry that people thought that—well, you and I had some sort of sexual relationship. I know that hurt you as much as it hurt me. It is a strange and unfeeling society we live in where two

men cannot have a close friendship without—well, certain people of low intelligence making something different out of that friendship.

"Noah, don't waste your life pining and moping away what time you have left you over a woman you haven't seen in thirty years."

Noah smiled and looked back at the priest. "Marta? My heavens, Daniel. I haven't thought of her in years. No, Daniel, Marta isn't the reason I never married. The years just seemed to march on past me, without my noticing their passage. I grew older, more set in my ways. Then one day I looked up and I was middle-aged. I—am eccentric, to say the least. It would take a woman of exceptional understanding to put up with me, Daniel. And to tell you the truth, I really haven't been looking that hard. No. I really haven't been looking at all."

"You haven't had to look," the priest said dryly. "You've been filling your bed with those young would-be writers and artists of the female gender out at your workshops."

Noah laughed softly. "Indeed I have, old friend. I have some marvelously delicious memories, Daniel. And I have absolutely no intention of apologizing for any of them."

The priest smiled. "I should tell you to be ashamed of your behavior and to do penance, but you would probably tell me to stick it in my ear."

"Not quite that crudely put, Daniel," Noah said with a chuckle. "But—close."

Both men were silent for a moment. Noah said, "Daniel, just for the sake of conversation, since we all might be looking at eternity any moment, how many people know you were adopted into the Le Moyne family as a young man?"

"I didn't know you knew, Noah."

"I guessed. Tricked you, old friend."

"Exactly, Daniel, how much do you know, or have guessed over the long years?"

"Let us just say, Daniel—or should I call you Yves?—that you are not of this world."

The priest did not elect to answer verbally. Instead, he rose from his chair and walked to the man. He put his hand on Noah's shoulder. Noah would remember nothing of the encounter. He would not remember anything about his suspicions of Father Le Moyne being anything other than a small parish priest in Logandale, New York.

But Noah's life, from that moment on, would be drastically altered.

The priest removed his hand and offered it to Noah. The writer took it. He could not remember the priest leaving his chair.

"You've been a good friend, Noah. I have enjoyed it."

"I, too, old friend."

Le Moyne lifted his eyes to the darkness of outside. "Something

moved out there, Noah."

Noah jerked his head around and searched the ink of night. "I see it, Daniel. Call Sam and Joe."

Sam came on the run. "Human, Noah?" he asked.

"Yes. I believe so." He pointed. "Right over there, Sam—see it?"

Sam could see the white form lying on the cold wet earth. "I can't tell from this distance if it's male or female. But whatever, it's naked. I'm going after it."

Before anyone could argue, Sam was running through the night. Joe was right behind him. The form on the cold ground was a woman. Sam rolled her over. He had seen her around the small town but did not know her name.

She opened her eyes. They were filled with horror and fright.

"Easy," Sam told her. "You're safe."

"Susie Parish," Joe said. "Vernon's wife. Jesus, Susie. What happened?"

She laughed bitterly. "You name it, Joe. If it's perverted and twisted, it was done to me." She put her head on the grass and began weeping.

"Come on, Joe. Help me get her inside."

Inside, the women took over. Nydia was ready with a blanket to place over the naked woman's shoulders. In the light of the kitchen, all could see the woman had been savagely abused. But despite the whip marks on her body and the bruises on her face, Susie was still a very attractive woman.

Susie was shaking from the cold, exhausted from her ordeal. But when Nydia tried to lead her out of the kitchen and into a bedroom, she pulled away.

"No," she gasped. "Got to tell you what I know. Why I came. It's—it's my oldest daughter, Judy. She's—one of them. I—never saw anything so awful in my life. She's one of the night people."

"Night people?" Viv questioned anyone who might give her an answer.

"The undead," Noah told her. Mrs. Parish, he concluded, was a gorgeous woman. Something about her fascinated the writer. She was so—strong. Brave. She had risked her life to come here, to warn them. What a completely unselfish gesture on her part.

Noah did not notice Father Le Moyne smiling at him.

"My youngest daughter, Anne, and my son, Fred, have gone over to the other side. Both of them rejected God and swore allegiance to Satan." Her eyes found Noah. "The coven members are going to storm this place at dawn. Hoping to catch you all by surprise. They thought I was knocked out. But I was only pretending. I slipped out the back window of the house and came here."

Noah squared his shoulders. "Then, my dear, we shall all certainly

be ready to repulse the attack." Although, he silently mused, he hadn't the foggiest idea *how*.

MIDNIGHT

Sam had slept for a few hours and felt refreshed. As he dressed, an idea began forming in his mind. He dressed in dark clothing, stuffed a dark blue skull cap in his pocket and a dark scarf around his neck. When he went out to do some headhunting, he would pull the scarf over his face, leaving only his eyes exposed.

He could tell the wind had picked up. It was still blowing out of the northwest, but with heavy gusts, maybe as much as thirty-five to forty miles per hour at times.

Look to yourself to even the odds. You are trained to do that. His father's words returned to him.

Sam's smile was a warrior's smile. Right, Dad, he thought. Guerrilla warfare, hit and run, demoralize the enemy. Hit hard and fast and deadly.

"All right, Dad," Sam said aloud. "I get the message."

Sam went downstairs and began gathering up long-necked bottles. He filled those three-quarters full with gasoline and mixed flour with the gas. The flour would stick the burning gasoline to a surface, thus ensuring a longer burning time. He jammed a rag down each bottle neck and carefully wrapped each bottle in a thick towel to prevent breakage. He found a knapsack taken from the sporting goods store and packed his Molotov cocktails.

Sam gathered most of the group in the darkened study of the mansion. Mille was standing guard toward the front of the mansion, second level. Nydia faced the rear of the house, also on the second level. Viv Draper, who it turned out was a crack shot, due to Monty's urgings just after they married, was on sentry duty at one end of the house. And Ginny, who really did not know which end of a rifle the bullet came out of, was at the opposite end of the mansion.

"No way we can hold off a couple thousand people, Sam," Monty said.

"I think we can," Sam told him. *"If* you people do what I tell you to do." He met each person's eyes in the dark room. "My wife, Mille, and Viv are expert shots. The others can keep the spare weapons loaded. We've got enough arms to outfit an entire company. That is exactly why I asked you men to show the non-combatants the nomenclature of all the weapons that first day here.

"It will be a frontal assault. It almost has to be. The woods behind the mansion are too thick and, from what Desiree tells me, the ground too unstable to permit much activity from that area. There will be some action from back there, but most of it will come from the front. I

don't think we have to worry much about men coming at us from the direction of the Giddon House. Too much danger of Xaviere getting hurt. So that leaves the front and the west.

"Monty, you and Viv and Joe will man the west side of the mansion. I'll be at the front, with Nydia and Noah. Richard, Desiree, John, Barbara, and Jeanne will take the back. They'll have shotguns. None of them can hit the broad side of the barn with a rifle or pistol, but with scatterguns they can do some damage. Father Le Moyne, Ginny, Mille, and Byron will face the Giddon House. Susie will look after Little Sam.

"Get containers of water and place near your positions. Where there is hot lead, there is danger of fire. Pull down all the drapes. Get rid of everything you can that is flammable. I want you all to gather up your teams and start boarding up windows on the ground floor. Right now. Pile furniture against the doors and up against the windows once you have them boarded up. Fix what I am about to say in your minds and *don't* forget it: We open this dance. Whenever one of them comes into view, man, woman, or child—shoot! And shoot to kill. Never let a shot go by. The first rule of survival is this: Shoot first and ask questions later. Remember, the lives of all of us depend on each of us.

"This upcoming battle is going to be the worst thing that any of you have ever experienced. And some of us aren't going to make it out alive. But death is better than being taken prisoner by the forces of the Dark One. Bear that in mind at all times. And this: We are all that stands between Satan taking over this community. It's up to us to make a stand."

The ministers of the Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopal churches rose to their feet. Richard spoke for all of them. "I do not believe it is a sin to kill someone who has forsaken God to worship Satan. And firing a shotgun does not appear to be all that difficult or complicated. If the Good Lord will forgive my language at this time, and I feel certain, under the circumstances, He will, you people have my word that I will kill any son-of-a-bitch who tries to overrun my perimeter."

"I couldn't have said it better," Byron said, sticking out his chin.

"Count me in until the end," John said. "I believe—I *know*—God is on our side in this fight."

"I saw a carbine among the weapons," Father Le Moyne said. "I'll take that and a .45 pistol."

Mille looked at the priest, astonishment in her eyes. Her mouth formed an O.

"Oh, don't look so amazed, Mille," Le Moyne said with a smile. "I was born and reared in the—wilderness, so to speak. Grew up with a rifle in my hands. I have hunted more than my share of venison, believe me. And bear, too."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Richard blurted.

"I rather doubt your being damned, Richard," the priest said. "But if you don't do something about your thoughts concerning Desiree, you're going to have a heart attack."

Richard blushed.

The wind was roaring with a fury when Sam, despite the objections of almost everyone in the house, announced his plans to do a bit of headhunting.

Only Nydia and Father Le Moyne did not object. The priest nodded his head in approval and Nydia kissed her husband.

Sam took his AK and a dozen clips, his .41 mag with two speed loaders, his knife, the knapsack full of cocktails, and a length of rope coiled around his chest and waist.

He stepped out into the darkness and slipped over the fence at the rear of the mansion. He was immediately surrounded by thick brush and timber. The ground felt unstable under his booted feet.

Sam sensed the presence of the Beasts seconds before he smelled them. He dropped to his knees in the brush and began breathing through his mouth to minimize noise. Then the smell came drifting to him. He cut his eyes and saw the wild red eyes searching the night. Three Beasts, standing almost shoulder to shoulder, their long hairy arms almost reaching the ground.

Sam slowly lifted the AK and burned half a clip at the hideous earthbound servants of Satan.

They squalled and howled and flopped obscenely on the ground and died.

Sam was up and moving before the echo of the AK had died away. Staying close to the stone fence, Sam edged his way toward the street and the sounds of men and women shouting and cursing.

"What the hell's all that shooting?" a man called.

Sam reached the end of the fence and cautiously looked around the corner, into the street. A group of men and women stood in the center of the street. Sam lifted the AK and used the remainder of his clip, knocking the knot of people sprawling. In the confusion of the moment, Sam took that opportunity to shoot out the nearest street lights, plunging that section of the street into darkness. The howling winds covered any sounds he made running across the street.

He darted into a shed and smelled the strong odor of raw gasoline. He found a full five gallon can and smiled a warrior's smile. Taking the can, he slipped behind a house and knelt beside a huge tank of heating oil. He opened the can of gas and spilled some on the ground, splashing some more on the tank. He darted to the next house, the can trailing gasoline. There, he knelt beside the heating oil tank and

spilled the rest of his gas. Using his big bowie knife, he slashed and hacked at the line leading from the tank to the house. Oil spilled on the ground. He dipped a handkerchief into the gas on the ground, wrapped that around a thick stick, and ran about fifty feet from the house. He lit the rag with his lighter and hurled the blazing stick, hitting the ground the instant the stick left his hand.

The houses erupted within two seconds of each other, the roaring explosions shaking the ground and sending debris flying in all directions. Sam rolled beside the protection of a concrete block shed and rode out the flaming fury.

From where he lay, he could hear the moaning and whimpering of the wounded and the dying. He jumped to his feet, slung the AK by the leather strap, and was running down the alley, digging in his knapsack for a cocktail. Pausing only long enough to light the

gasoline-soaked rag protruding from the neck of the bottle, he would then hurl the cocktail through a window. He began darting from house to house, skipping every other building. He was successful ten out of twelve times in setting a building ablaze. The winds began roaring, and Sam knew the howling winds were no accident. Soon the entire area around the Giddon House and Fox Estate was blazing, flames leaping into the night sky, fanned by the howling northwest winds, spreading the licking fury onto other homes.

A bullet striking the corner of a building sent painful splinters of wood into Sam's cheek. He jerked back and wiped away the blood.

"There's the son-of-a-bitch!" a woman shouted, pointing in Sam's direction. "Let's get him!"

Sam shot the woman in the stomach with his .41 mag. She slammed onto the concrete of the street and lay screaming her life away, kicking and howling. Her soul went winging into the depths of hell and into the dark arms of the Master she had willingly chosen to serve on God's earth.

Sam picked another splinter out of his cheek, wiped more blood away, and ran down the flaming alley, the AK at combat arms, ready to spit lead death at any who dared challenge the God Sam had sworn to serve.

A crowd of men and women and teenagers picked up the challenge by charging at Sam, waving clubs and guns and knives, shouting their contempt for him.

"Take him alive!" a woman reminded the others. "The Princess wants his seed. Jump on him and drag, him down."

"Not if I can help it," Sam panted. He leveled the Kalishnikov and pulled the trigger, holding it back, fighting to suppress the natural rise of the weapon on full auto.

The flames from the burning homes and sheds were leaping into the

air, fiery fingers reaching toward the night sky, devouring everything they touched on the ground that God created and Satan now claimed as his.

A man ran from a burning home, his clothing and hair blazing. His agonizing screaming touched the spine of all who heard him. The man fell face first onto the concrete of the street. He beat his hands in pain and then was silent as his body cooked, the fat from his flesh bubbling as it fried.

"Better get used to the sensation, sucker," Sam muttered. "And you get your feet to working," he reminded himself.

Sam ran across the street, always edging his way back toward the mansion. He kept to the shadows as much as possible, making a seldom seen, very elusive target for the Devil worshippers.

Logandale had a fire department, but it was obvious to Sam that nobody was manning the equipment, for the fires were now out of control, and spreading very quickly, threatening to expand their blistering path of devastation into other areas in that part of town.

Sam lay in the shadows across the street from the raging fires and turned sniper, picking his targets, the AK on semiauto. The roaring of the flames, the cracking and collapsing of structures, the howling of the suddenly rising winds—always out of the northwest, never varying—and the screaming of men and women and teenagers in the grips of pure panic and pain covered his gunfire.

And somebody, or *something*, was keeping the winds away from Fox Estate and the Giddon House, and steadily pushing them toward more heavily populated residential areas of Logandale.

Sam felt he knew who that person was.

Faintly penetrating the roar of destruction from the flames, Sam could hear the sounds of sirens and the shouting of men and women. The fire-fighting equipment was on the way, but for many blocks, it was too late. All the firefighters could do now was set back-fires and hope that would contain the rampaging conflagration.

Sam lay in his well-concealed position and sniped and watched the action unfold before him. His smile was a grim tiger's snarl. He lifted his AK and shot a fireman off a truck, then knocked another down, forcing the men and equipment back. Sam doubted that after this night anyone would mass to march against the small band of Christians at dawn. At worst, Sam had bought them all a day, maybe two days. He hoped for the latter.

Sam slipped from his concealment and ran down the sidewalk, expecting any moment to feel the impact of a bullet in his flesh, for he was starkly outlined against the glow from the flames.

No lead came his way.

We are all that is left, Sam thought. We are the last Christians left alive in Logandale.

He wondered how he knew that.

Then he realized he had not thought it. It had been spoken to him.

"All right, Dad," he panted the words. "I hear you."

He ran past the Giddon House, then did a turnaround and ran back to the locked gates of the great mansion. Behind him, the woods were on fire across the road, the exploding sap from the tall trees sounding very much like a battleground.

Sam leveled his AK at the big picture windows in the front of the mansion and squeezed the trigger, holding it back, working the weapon from left to right, spraying the windows. Someone in the house screamed, whether in pain or fright, Sam could not tell.

He slipped in a fresh clip and let those on the second floor of the mansion know he was present. The falling of broken glass, the shouting and screaming from the second level gave loud and painful testimony that Sam's presence was not at all welcomed by those inside.

Grinning with satisfaction, Sam ran back to the safety of Fox Estate.

DAWN. THURSDAY.

Sam had slept deeply and soundly, awakening refreshed. He awakened with a feeling that the battle was, somehow, almost over. When he looked out the window, that feeling was heightened.

Sam dressed and joined the others in the upstairs study. The scene before their eyes resembled a miniature replay of the aftermath of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings of 1945.

"Good Lord," Noah muttered, gazing at the sight from the upstairs study. "Sam, you were a one-man wrecking crew last night."

Sam smiled. "I did play hell with the town, didn't I?"

A full three thousand yards, running from the road well into Logandale proper was now reduced to charred, blackened ruins. Small fires still burned, sending black greasy smoke into the air. Bodies littered the soot-covered streets and sidewalks. The carcasses lay in grotesque, stiffening postures of painful death.

There was no wind. The morning had dawned cool and utterly still.

"There is nothing on radio or TV about this, Sam," Monty said, entering the room. "I don't understand that. But what really bugs me is this: How come we still have power after last night?"

"You'll have to ask my dad about that," Sam replied. He once more felt his father's presence.

"I think I'll pass on that," Monty said. "No offense to your dad intended," he quickly added, casting nervous eyes about the room.

"I'll go along with him," Joe said, jerking a thumb toward Monty.

"How can we have electricity? All the damn lines are down! You can see them layin' in the street. It's—hell, impossible."

"Don't question," Father Le Moyne said. "It is best to just accept."

Barbara Morton looked out at the scenes of death and destruction. "I wonder how many died last night?"

"Not enough," Richard Hasseling replied, with considerable heat in his voice. Richard's views toward many things were undergoing a rapid metamorphosis.

"Princess?" Edie Cash approached the young woman sitting in the dark room. "Our people are demoralized. The death count from last night is close to two hundred. All because of one man. One man! And he seemed impervious to injury."

"Sam Balon is mortal," Xaviere replied. "He is just very, very lucky, that is all." But the young woman was not that certain—not anymore. Sam's burst of gunfire had killed Frank Gilbert and seriously wounded Norman Giddon. No one among them had expected such a vicious counterattack from the Christians; nothing like that sudden barbarism from the Christians.

It just wasn't like Christians. Not at all. All during her short life Xaviere had been taught to believe that Christians—for the most part—were all wimps.

The Princess was confused, but not personally afraid. She was a demon-child, so no mere mortal could harm her. But she didn't know what to do.

"I want you people to maintain steady gunfire into the Giddon House," Sam told the group. "We'll alternate those firing to minimize the strain. We've got dozens of boxes of ammunition. We'll work on their nerves. Let them get accustomed to one round every thirty seconds, then pick it up to one round every fifteen seconds. Let them grow used to a certain rhythm, then change it. Work on the most vulnerable spots of the house, and keep the pressure on. Let's do it, gang."

Sheriff Pat Jenkins was the first to fall under the hail of bullets, buckshot, and slugs from the Christians. Richard Hasseling literally blew the man's head apart when Jenkins carelessly exposed himself.

"Chalk one up for God," Richard muttered, then threw up on the floor.

Inside the Giddon House, nerves were beginning to fray under the constant whining and cracking of bullets. Everyone had retreated to the far side of the mansion, seeking safety, but secure refuge was elusive when Sam started using Teflon-coated bullets. The super-slug would drive through half a dozen walls and still have the power to

kill.

One of the super-slugs snuffed out Norman Giddon's life as the wounded man tried to crawl to safety.

"Joe?" Sam called. "You and Monty get up on the roof with rifles. You'll have a clear field of fire across the burned area. Knock down anyone who tries to approach. I'll join you in a minute."

This time, Monty showed no reluctance in firing. Using scope-mounted rifles, the men began sniping at anything that moved within range. Both men were expert shots, and soon the area was cleared of all living things. Now dead littered the smoking area.

When Sam joined them, with a 7mm magnum, the sniping took on a new ferocity. Soon, none of the Devil worshippers dared venture anywhere near the burn area.

It became a standoff.

THURSDAY EVENING

Satan admitted it. He was beaten unless somehow his followers could rally themselves and charge the mansion where the Christians had barricaded themselves.

But the Dark One knew the odds of that occurring were slim.

Damn Sam Balon!

And Satan knew something else the young man did not know. There were whispered comments among Satan's own forces that Sam Balon had been chosen to lead God's fight here on Earth. And it was all the fault of that meddling old warrior. Things had been going so well here on Earth, too. All that lovely pornography; the lessening of ethics in business; younger and younger kids experimenting with dope and fucking around; teenage suicides increasing; morals at an all-time low; swingers clubs popping up everywhere, everybody fucking and sucking and sodomizing; more and more people cheating on taxes; crime on a rampage; race relations deteriorating ... all that good stuff. Everything had been going so smoothly.

Now this.

Shit!

Satan turned his dark face toward the firmament and screamed, "You son-of-a-bitch!"

"Turn on the floodlights," Sam told Noah.

With a *pop*, the outside grounds around the estate were bright as day.

Without electricity producing the current.

Sam keyed his handy-talkie. "Everybody in position on the roof?"

They were.

"Stay alert," Sam cautioned them. "Their last rush will be coming

tonight. And don't ask me how I know. I just know."

The firing on the house continued without letup, as it had since seven o'clock that morning. And judging from the occasional screams, the bullets were taking their toll, both mentally and physically.

"Here they come!" Monty called from the roof. "What are we going to do when they shoot out the floodlights?"

"Either change the bulbs or fight in the dark," Sam yelled his reply.

And then there was no time left for conversation. The Devil worshippers made no attempt at fancy maneuvering. Theirs was a straight on, frontal, human-wave type of assault. And they paid dearly for it.

Every weapon in the house had been fully loaded that afternoon; every spare clip had been loaded to capacity. But even with all that going for them, the Devil worshippers came very close, several times, to overwhelming the Christians by sheer numbers. Only the high fence around the mansion prevented that.

After an hour, hearing became impaired from the constant roaring of multiple weapons; shoulders were bruised and sore from the pounding of high-powered rifles and shotguns; eyes were red and smarting from gunsmoke.

And still the devotees to the Devil hurled their bodies at the Christians in a frenzied attempt to overpower them. All thoughts of taking Sam and Nydia and Little Sam alive were gone. Revenge and death were uppermost in the minds of those committed to serving the Dark One.

And if the coven members had given their plan some deeper thought, had carefully considered all aspects of the assault, they could have easily overwhelmed the small band of defenders. But determination and cool heads have many times in the past prevailed over brute force.

And so it was this time.

By ten o'clock that night, the human waves had ceased. An eerie quiet fell over the body-littered land.

"Now what?" Noah was heard to question the stillness.

A clump-thump was heard coming up the street, followed by a shuffling type of step; many feet.

"What the hell?" Monty said.

"The undead," Father Le Moyne said quietly. "They are sending the undead after us."

Sam ran to the rear of the house, calling for Joe to come help him.

"What's up, Sam?"

"Help me make some Molotov cocktails. Bullets won't kill those—things. But fire will."

Siphoning gas from Sam's truck, the men quickly fashioned the fire

bombs. They ran back to the front of the mansion.

"Oh, Dear God in Heaven!" John Morton said, pointing to the street. All heads turned.

He was pointing at Ann; at the hammer still tied around her severed ankle. Ann stood beside Max, Lisa LaMeade beside her. Will and Judy and Dan and Jerry and Marie stood behind them.

Pete LaMeade stood behind the lines of undead, grinning at the house.

"That's Mommy\" Jeanne shrieked. "Mommy!"

The girl was off and running toward the rotted form of her mother before anyone in the house could stop her.

The mother smiled grotesquely and opened her flesh-decaying arms in a welcoming embrace for her living daughter.

SIX

"I think the same thing is happening here as happened in Canada," Janet said to Princess Xaviere. "God, or one of His asshole friends is helping Balon; blocking out our Master. I think we have to face up to the fact that we have lost."

"All is *not* lost!" the Princess snapped. "The undead are out there now. They—"

"They will do nothing," Janet said flatly. "I am almost certain Sam Balon has been blessed."

"No!"

"Yes, Princess. And it is time to consider our leaving this dreadful place."

"I so wanted Balon's seed within me," Xaviere sighed.

You wanted his cock in you, is what you wanted, Janet thought, but thought so very carefully, blocking out any mind-projection. "There will be another time. In another place."

"You're right, of course, Janet," the Princess reluctantly capitulated. "When we reach safety, we will begin immediately formulating plans to capture Sam Balon."

"Yes, Princess."

Xaviere Flaubert looked toward the Fox Estate. "There will be another time, dear Father Sam. I promise you that."

"Who do we take with us?" Janet questioned.

"Jon Le Moyne, of course. Jimmy, too. Your earth parents. One or two others. I don't care. I just want to leave this dismal place of failure."

"Yes, Princess."

Joe grabbed Jeanne's ankles and dragged her down from the fence, throwing her to the ground. Mille reached her sister and sat on her.

Sam lit a bottle of gas and hurled it toward the open-armed undead woman. The gas exploded at the dead woman's feet, completely covering her in flames. Her husband screamed his outrage and charged the fence, climbing over the bodies stacked on the street side of the fence. Sam burned half a clip into the man, knocking him backward, but not killing him.

Pete LaMeade jumped to his feet, smoking holes in his chest. He grinned at Sam. His grin exposed needle-pointed teeth and a bright red tongue, swollen with blood. He once more charged at Sam.

Sam threw a cocktail at him, the bottle breaking on the man's chest, the gasoline igniting, covering the man with fire. Pete screamed and ran into the night. The others, now confused and frightened, followed him, lumbering and staggering and clumping away into the night.

Joe and Sam helped Mille with her sister, leading the sobbing young woman back to the house.

Nydia met her husband. She was grimy with gunsmoke, her eyes red-rimmed from smoke and fatigue. "It's over, isn't it, Sam?"

"Almost," he replied. "The beginning of the end starts at dawn."

FRIDAY MORNING

"Sam!" Monty shouted. "Father Le Moyne is gone!"

Sam looked toward the heavens. "No," he said softly. "His job here was over. He just went home."

"What?" Noah asked.

Dawn was lighting the eastern sky, spreading traces of red and pink and gray against a backdrop of purple.

"Father Le Moyne was Father Sam," the young man told a stunned group of survivors.

"Your Dad told you?" Nydia asked, coming to him, to take her husband's hand.

"Yes. He and Father Sam left together, about fifteen minutes ago. Dad said neither of them would be back. It's up to us now, Nydia. You, me, Little Sam."

"Little Sam is—"

"All right. Like you, Nydia, the dark side of his being will only serve to make him stronger in his faith."

"The people at the Giddon House?" Viv asked.

"There is no one there," Sam told them. "Xaviere and a few of the others slipped out during the night. But I will meet them again. That is my purpose for being."

"Lordy!" Joe said. "Your daddy told you that?"

"No," the tall young man said. "Someone else."

"Jesus!" Monty blurted.

Sam looked at him and smiled. "Close," he said.

FRIDAY. NOON.

Even Joe was shocked when Sam calmly and without any display of emotion lifted his AK and shot the man in the stomach. The man flopped on the littered street, screaming in pain.

"Sam—" Monty said.

"We killed probably half of this coven," Sam explained. "The rest are confused and in hiding. Don't ever think we aren't in grave danger. But we've got them on the run. They know they've been deserted by their leaders, and they don't know what to do or where to go, because they've discovered they can't get out. But I'm going to help them."

The two men looked at him.

"I am going to destroy this town," Sam announced, with no more emotion than if asking someone to pass the butter.

"We gather up all the fifty-five gallon drums in this community," Sam said. "Get all the heating oil and gasoline tanker trucks left around here. Drain every filling station storage tank. Fill the drums. There are sump pumps in this town. Let's find them and get to work."

SATURDAY

It had been a quiet night. Eerie, knowing the community was still filled with coven members, but still quiet, with no action taken against the Christians.

Sam gathered the little band of survivors around him. He had broken them down into three teams of five each. They all knew what they had to do.

"As soon as you have completed your tasks," Sam told the group, "get out of this community. For it's not going to exist much longer. Get your stories straight between you; keep them simple, for you are going to have to live with them the rest of your lives. All the authorities have to know is that you people survived a great tragedy. That much will be the truth. You can't tell them you've been fighting God's war; you'd all end up in the nut house. So I would just tell them you managed to survive a great fire. The stories you tell are up to you. It's doubtful any of you will ever see Nydia, Little Sam, or myself again. Everybody ready? O.K., let's do it."

The teams began pumping raw gasoline and heating oil into the sewer system of Logandale. Thousands of gallons of flammable liquids were dumped into mains. Open drums of gas and oil were left all over the town. Anywhere a heating oil tank was found, the contents were drained onto the ground.

"Good God, don't nobody light a cigarette," Joe warned. "Don't scrape no metal against nothing that'll cause a spark. We'd all go up like a Roman candle."

"That's the general idea," Sam said.

"Lordy, Lordy!" Joe said.

When only one small tank truck was all that was left, Sam told his people to get going. But they were reluctant to leave the young man's side. Sam had led them through a living nightmare, and all had grown accustomed to taking his commands.

Sam looked at the small gathering of Christians. So very few of us, he thought. Out of a population of probably more than four thousand—this is it. Three or four hundred others had been brutally killed, tortured to death, but that still leaves several thousand whose faith was so weak they reached toward the hands of the Dark One, forsaking the Living God.

Dad was right: Heaven will be sparsely populated.

"I don't want to make this sound like an old TV show," Sam said. "But I have a mission. Nydia, Little Sam, and me. I don't know where we're going to be sent. But wherever it is, we'll go."

Sam shook hands with everyone, receiving several kisses from the women. Nydia embraced and kissed them all.

Sam looked at Noah. "You're in charge, Noah. Get them out of here."

Noah stood holding hands with Susie. He nodded. "God go with you all," he said. He turned to the others. "Let's go, people. We've got some planning to do. And I've got several books to write."

Sam and his family stood and watched them leave, heading out of town. He waited fifteen minutes.

"Drive my pickup," he told Nydia. "I'll drive the last tanker truck. Meet you at the city limits."

Sam opened the drains and let raw gas spill onto the street as he drove slowly out of the Devil's town. He was aware of being watched; he expected at any second to be fired upon. But nothing happened.

He could not understand that. Then one reason came to him: They are afraid of God's Warrior. Hate has changed to fear and turned inward on the followers of the Dark One.

"I should feel pity," he murmured. "But I do not. I cannot."

And he knew then his future was set before him. His destiny was clearly written.

On the outskirts of town, Sam got behind the wheel of his pickup. He dropped the pickup into gear and tossed a match into the puddle of gas. With a *whoosh* the gas ignited and fire raced down the center of the highway as Sam floorboarded the pedal.

Less than a quarter of a mile into safety, a great ball of fire leaped into the sky. The force of the explosion actually lifted the rear wheels of the pickup off the concrete for a second. Sam fought the wheel for control, drove on another half mile, then pulled off the road and looked back.

"I don't think that was all gas causing that," he said to Nydia.

He pulled out onto the highway and pointed the nose of the Chevy westward.

Nydia glanced at his rugged features. "Where are we going, Sam, and what is going to happen to us?"

"God only knows," was his truthful reply.

EPILOGUE

The survivors kept their stories simple. They had survived; been in the right place at the right time, that was all. No, none of them knew exactly what happened. But it was terrible—a horrible thing. No, they didn't want to sell their stories to any publisher.

They just wanted to be left alone; to try to forget.

Monty and Viv moved to Vermont, where Monty found a job as chief of police in a small village.

Joe married Mille and moved to Kentucky.

Noah married Susie, rebuilt his writers' colony and returned to his work as a novelist.

Richard Hasseling married Desiree and moved to Mississippi, where he now pastors a small church.

Byron Price married Ginny and moved to Wyoming.

John Morton and Barbara worked out their problems and moved to Tennessee.

Jeanne is in high school in Kentucky. She lives with Joe and Mille.

And Sam, Nydia, and Little Sam are on the road. They wait for instructions from a Higher Authority. They know where the Daughter of Darkness and her court went. Another coven is being established. And they know it will have to be destroyed.

They wait.

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